THE CELLINI PLAQVE

HAROLD MAC GRATH

To My Dear Mary Anna
10/19/1930

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BY

HAROLD MacGRATH

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THE MAN ON THE BOX,
THE GREEN STONE, Etc.

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

PART I

THE CELLINI PLAQUE

CHAPTER I

ROBERT ELLISON, collector and scholar, threw up his hands and laughed. "Poggioli, you're crazy!" he said. Ellison's Italian agent shook his head vehemently.

"I have seen it. I have seen the documentary evidence also."

"Why the secrecy then?"

"The Italian Government keeps tabs upon art treasures they know about; and the owner of this plaque does not want them paying domiciliary visits at unexpected times. More, it is probable they would confiscate it and force him to accept a nominal sum for what, if he wished to sell, he could get a fortune."

"I understand that. But a chrysoprase plaque by Cellini is in the realm of nightmares.

If your cable had been explicit, I shouldn't have crossed the Atlantic. In Cellini's time, chrysoprase, as we know it, had not been discovered; and the chrysoprase of the Greeks had passed without trace. And above all, Cellini was a goldsmith; and crystal carving is another art. No, no, Poggioli; doubtless you have seen something beautifully done by some old master, but you haven't discovered a Cellini. It can't be done. I have hunted for ten years all over the Continent, and I have found but a single cup which, backed by proper evidence, might pass as Cellini's."

"I am astonished, sir."

"At my incredulity? Take it that way. Who owns this marvel?"

Poggioli shook his head.

"I shall take you to the man in due time. He is out of town for ten days."

"And I must wait ten days?"

"I am sorry, but he left Florence after I cabled you. I promise you that the wait will be worth your while. You know all there is to know

about Cellini—his characteristics, his intolerance at having any rivals in sculpture. Observe his Perseus. Supposing Pope Clement had told Cellini that he could not produce a gem in crystal. He would have defied the Pope and added one more treasure to art."

"All that I admit."

"Has there ever been any public record of the treasures of the old popes?"

Ellison grew thoughtful.

"I cannot say that there has been."

"Then who can say that Pope Clement did not have a piece of ancient chrysoprase in his chests? Cellini had no gold, no gems. These were poured into his basket by kings and popes, to let him work his will of them. This plaque is of extraordinary colour and beauty. But it is understood that no word of this gets abroad."

"That is understood. What does your man want for it?" Ellison knew that he would shortly hear an old, old tale.

Poggioli made a negative gesture.

"You are a rich man, but all your riches would

not stir the man to part with this gem. He said he would permit you to see it because of your book on Cellini. I bought a copy and gave it to him. But for that he would have refused. But do not offer him a price. It is not for sale."

Like all men who hunt for treasures, piratical or artistic, there was in the back of Ellison's head a persistent notion that some day he would discover a genuine Cellini and have the pleasure of announcing his discovery to the world; that is to say, he wanted to discover something he could possess. The astounding information that a Florentine had a Cellini and would not sell it weakened his skepticism considerably. Old Greeks littered the Vatican; why not a bit of ancient chrysoprase in Clement's chest? He was impressed.

"You mean to say that he refuses to sell at any price?"

"It is a fact."

"Then why the devil did you drag me across the Atlantic?"

"Simply to see it. There is no commission for me. Wait until you look upon it."

"Well, of course. But I've wasted my time on a hundred wild-goose chases. I have a good deal of confidence in your judgment; but a Cellini, now!"

Poggioli spread his hands. He was a man in middle years, with an eye like a hawk's for an imposture or a forgery on canvas, as Ellison had reason to know. From time to time Ellison bought a painting, but only after it had gone through Poggioli's hands. Thus far all these canvases had been proved genuine. So he had grown trustful of his agent. The man knew all the forgers and their cunning tricks, and Ellison was always being impressed by the fact that the genius of rogues was generally superior to that of honest men.

"Describe it to me."

'Six inches in diameter; a hunting scene around an unmarked dulled centre. It is like a crown jewel."

"But I'm not an authority on crystal carving, even if done by Cellini."

"It is not the crystal, but the workmanship; in that you will recognize the master."

"And worth exactly what a crazy fool like me would be willing to pay for it. But I'm wary. I've been fooled too many times. Why do you refuse to give me the man's name, since there is no commission for you?"

Poggioli smiled urbanely.

"Suppose you met him and he learned that you are rich. Supposing he decided to sell the plaque. Nothing is impossible. Would you not pay four times the price I might get for you?"

"There is reason in that."

"Agents are not always on the side of the seller. You would have paid twenty-five thousand for that passable Carlo Dolci; but I got it for you for eighteen. My man gambles. Who can say that he might not weaken some day? Gamblers must have money to play with, you know."

"Offer him thirty thousand for it," said Ellison, purely in jest.

"He will laugh. The plaque is the most exquisite thing I have ever seen. A light emerald green against a background of white velvet. When he dies it goes to the Crown; he says that much. I want you to set your judgment upon the plaque. You have already a Cellini cup."

"A cup I believe his, but cannot swear to. There is a wide hole in the Cellini record. Many treasures disappeared long before Napoleon's indemnity. Well, I'm curious, so I'll wait for your man's return. But I am a man of little faith."

"I promise you that you will not be indifferent when you see the gem. I shall notify you instantly of his return."

Poggioli bowed himself out. Ellison lit his pipe and began tramping about the room. Queer, but he wasn't on fire at all. Upon receiving Poggioli's cable that a Cellini had been unearthed he had been tremendously excited, and now he seemed rather washed out. Had the plaque been in silver or gold or bronze, his in-

terest would have held out. But a gem by Cellini in chrysoprase was out of order, not among credible things. He had a superficial knowledge of chrysoprase, but not sufficient to pass judgment. Old Volterrani, who sold the stone near the Ponte Vecchio, would know. But in order to get Volterrani's judgment the plaque would have to be bought, and the man who owned it refused to sell.

But this unrest—what did it signify? Was he tiring of the chase? Was this particular thrill worn out? A sharp diversion of calibre was what he needed, and his mind seemed without suggestions. He was only thirty-five; it would be ten years before he reached the top of the hill. Perhaps he had begun to feel his loneliness, more or less self-imposed. Perhaps the old house back in New York had started this mood; always filled with silence and soft-footed servants. He had tried to make a night of it in New York and had given up the job quickly in distaste. What in the world did he want? Or was it his liver? He laughed.

A woman? He could not say. He had had his dreams, of course; but he had never yet seen a woman he cared to dream about. Oh, he had had his flirtations, as he sometimes fished for trout, with barbless hooks. But the women of the day bored him with their slang and cigarettes and cocktails. He had written a book on Cellini's art that had received serious consideration by the savants; but all the women he knew thought Cellini was the name of a fiddle.

Impatiently he took up his binoculars and approached the window from which he could look down upon the yellow Arno. He focused the glasses upon the fishermen standing just below the dam, lifting and lowering their nets. During the many seasons he had spent in Florence, he had yet to see a wriggling fish in any of the nets. Being something of a fisherman himself, he knew that there is no other brand of hope so impervious to despair as that which abides in the hearts of fishermen.

It was near to four o'clock in the afternoon, late in May.

Presently Ellison would be going over to the tennis club in the park to meet his old friends the Lucchesis, and that would end his boredom for the day. How fond he was of the Italians, and how he loved Lucchesi! What fun he and Giovanni had had in their teens, with their green noddles full of Alexandre Dumas!

Up and down the Lungarno snubby little victorias clattered, some racing into town and others jogging toward the Cascine, the great park. A noisy city, this delectable Florence; noise which came from underfoot, for most of the town is paved with stone flags, as slippery as blue ice on rainy days, and inconveniently hot from May to October. And so dusty; yet the loveliest old city in Europe. Here it was that humanity got its second wind; cast aside the battle-axe for the brush. Dante, Raphael, Michelangelo; a city filled with the ghosts of giants. To walk across the Ponte Vecchio at night was to see that old ruffian come to life again, a golden chalice in his left hand and the most formidable sword

in Florence in his right, shouting to the lurking bravos, "I am Cellini, you fools!"

Up went the nets and down again. Ellison humorously imagined that sometime during the reign of Cosimo I some chap had caught a fish in the Arno—and wrecked many a future husband. To go fishing—what else is so delightful to the born loafer?

As usual, there were lesser loafers watching the fishermen from the parapet. Ellison laughed, and noticed a young woman leaning against the barrier. Thirty-five years ago Destiny had perfectly timed this moment.

CHAPTER II

A YOUNG woman in a leghorn hat. Here was something Fashion found imperturbable to her dictations; it refused to be relegated to the attic; it declined to become costly. Ellison knew that there was a straw-hat mart near the Palazzo Vecchio where one could buy half a dozen leghorns for ten lire. A woman's face, plain or lovely, always possessed charm under the wide brim of this particular kind of hat. Ellison chuckled; he was thinking like a man milliner. A single wreath of pink roses ran around the crown of the hat.

She was leaning upon her elbows. She was young. The graceful slenderness of her body spoke of youth. Ellison stared at her through his binoculars. With a quick, impatient gesture, as if irritated by some thought, the young woman turned. Ellison drew in his breath sharply.

Heaven on earth, what a lovely face! Italian? He could not say. She began to walk toward the Cascine, which was only a few blocks west. As she did not hail a carriage, he supposed her to be English or American; for no well-dressed Florentine woman would dream of walking along the Lungarno at four in the afternoon.

At once a species of madness fell upon Ellison, a species which strikes more frequently at twenty than at thirty-five. He determined to follow the young woman. He ran down to the street with a recklessness similar to that energized by the cry of "Fire." He was on fire, but he was unaware of the fact. He kept a hundred yards between himself and his unsuspecting quarry. What purpose had he in view? He did not know. For the present it was enough to follow her. And as he followed he became conscious of two sensations—that his conduct was undignified and that he revelled in the fact. He would pursue the unknown as he pursued tentative Cellinis; and if he fell afoul the police, all the merrier. This nonsense was exactly

what he needed. Of course he would not affront her by offering speech. He would follow her to her destination and perhaps get a closer view of her face. Mad! He felt like taking off his hat and throwing it into the air.

She led him into the Cascine, thence to the tennis club, greatly to his satisfaction. He gave the unknown a few minutes' leeway, then entered the grounds. The leghorn hat and Robert Ellison were social equals. He was still mad, but he was no longer aware of it.

He strolled about leisurely, searching for his friends, but in no hurry. They were serving tea on the veranda; men and women in white, with a scattering of military uniforms and a few gay parasols. It was the end of the season, and in a few days the courts and the Cascine alike would be deserted by fashion.

Ellison knew many of those present, but indifferently. Possessing no villa out toward Fiesole, and never entertaining on a noticeable scale, he was not always quickly recognized by the gay Florentines; and he was the last man to

complain, caring only for his few friends and nothing at all for social prestige. They knew that his father had been a noted portrait painter; but what they did not know was that the painter had inherited from his father coal mines and railroads and ships. Even Ellison's dear friends, the Lucchesis, were not aware of these riches. A vast fortune was, as Ellison knew, an irresistible magnet and drew falseness and insincerity from all directions. Hence Ellison's bachelordom at thirty-five. He hated the thought of falling in love with a woman who wanted only his money. His father's unhappy marriage was always vividly in his recollection. Presently he saw the leghorn hat, surrounded by young men. Well, of course, that was bound to happen; but he did not like it.

The Lucchesis greeted him joyously. He and Lucchesi had romped the town together in their teens, considering themselves dreadful daredevils, stealing kisses where they were to be found, drinking unripe wines and smoking black pencil-like cheroots, which stunned them; rent-

ing spirited nags occasionally and exploring Tuscany; running into innocuous mischief whenever it beckoned; the only joyous days Ellison could remember.

"Who is that young woman in the leghorn hat?" he asked.

"You mean Lisabetta Peruzzi?" asked Mrs. Lucchesi.

"If she's the one under the leghorn."

"Why?"

"I'm enough my father to note a beautiful face."

Lucchesi and his wife exchanged glances and then began to laugh.

"I suppose you wish to be presented. She is Sandro Peruzzi's daughter."

"And who is Sandro Peruzzi?"

"He comes from the old middle class; but her mother was of the Roman aristocracy. She is adorable, and Giovanni and I love her, and she is our guest to-day. But her father! Well, there isn't in Florence a more suave and polished man. He never goes anywhere."

"Except to Monte Carlo," said Lucchesi. "He would trade his daughter's shoes for a marker. No use beating about the bush, Rita. The old fellow went through his wife's money in three years. He would gamble the villa, but he has only a life interest in that. We don't like him, for we believe he is trying to force Betta into marriage with some rich man—any rich man—so that he may sponge on the son-in-law."

"And humiliates her and keeps her without enough money to pay cab hire," supplemented Mrs. Lucchesi. "Betta never goes anywhere, because she has no clothes; and she's as proud as Lucifer. She has vowed she will never marry a man with money. We would not say these things to any but an old friend like you."

"Why all this family history?" Ellison asked, puzzled.

"Because if you are seen with her, others will give you the history with elaborations," said Mrs. Lucchesi. "Betta is not popular; she is a little too beautiful."

"I see. Cats in Florence as elsewhere. Would

she think of marrying a man who could just about keep the butcher and baker at arms' length?"

"You, for instance!" Mrs. Lucchesi laughed. She felt jubilant. He was walking right into the trap. This splendid scholarly American and Betta Peruzzi! "She might marry a poor man if she loved him. It would be sweet revenge upon that father of hers. She has already refused a dozen men of wealth—some of them young and handsome too."

"If I were handsome——"

"Nonsense! You are fascinating when you exert yourself. Don't you know it?"

Ellison expanded. He was human.

"I could afford a woman ordinary luxuries, but I could not afford an indemnity to the father. I could give what Jack here gives you." He had always called Giovanni Jack. "Has she fallen in love yet?"

"I do not believe so."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-four."

"And I am thirty-five."

"This begins to look serious."

"Thirty-five is always serious. Perhaps it is because I haven't noticed a woman in a long time."

"Thanks."

"I mean a young woman."

Mrs. Lucchesi laughed so heartily that Lisabetta glanced her way.

"You begin to remind me of the old days, when we were less than twenty," observed Giovanni. "Your compliments were always side-splitting."

"Present me."

After all, it was time he indulged in a little fooling. Love? That was nonsense. For the first time in many years a woman's face had captivated him. And yet, if he had not seen Lisabetta Peruzzi by the parapet, it was doubtful if his interest would have been more than negligible.

"I'll pave the way," said Mrs. Lucchesi. "She is not aware that you were included in the party."

"Who is that man?" asked Lisabetta at once. "He followed me all the way from the Hôtel de Ville."

"Scarcely. He was merely following your direction. We had invited him. He is an old friend of Giovanni's—an American."

"Is he rich?"

"His father was a painter, and he writes."

"Then he will be poor!" Lisabetta laughed. "Bring him over."

Ellison sat down beside her, happy but diffident.

"Rita says you write."

"A little. I'm not a novelist, though."

"Oh?"

"Do you speak English?"

"A little. But you speak Italian well. Your gestures—I was watching you."

"It's odd. When I speak English I never gesture; when I speak Italian I become a windmill. I say, have you a singing cricket yet?"

She leaned back and laughed.

"*Il Grillo!* I haven't thought of crickets since I was a child."

"The Cascine is always alive with them this time of year. I remember one Ascension Day. You know—the day of the crickets, when everybody eats breakfast in the fields. Well, Giovanni and I made a hundred francs selling crickets to American tourists. We were going to be rich; but Giovanni's father trounced him."

"Your father was a painter?"

"Unknown over here except for his friendships. But singing crickets do bring good luck. One summer I carried one all over Europe, and at last let him go in the Bois."

"Did he bring you good luck?" The tone was lightly skeptical.

"He did. I found a Giorgione in a garret and was able to restore it to the man from whom it was stolen."

"And you call that good luck! I understood that luck was something that profited oneself."

"To restore a thing of beauty to its proper environment is always worth something."

She liked that; he would be unselfish. She liked his eyes, too, and the pleasantly accented voice.

"Singing crickets, in little wire cages—fancy your selling them to tourists! I suppose you know Florence better than we who live here. I have lived here nearly all my life, and I have never seen the house in which Dante is said to have been born."

How beautiful she was! There was a demureness about her beauty that suggested Botticelli. Vivid dark eyes, hair that shone like polished ebony, a mouth whose scarlet was its own, the skin the colour of light honey; twenty-four and not married; but it seemed incredible to Ellison that she had not attracted a love fit to awaken hers. Supposing she had. What an infernal thought and how it hurt!

Love orders its affairs by no given rule or time clock. It happens. It is not necessary to have reasons, for the true lover finds his reason only

when there is no going back. Then, if he is satisfied with what his reason tells him, he is indeed a happy man.

"I say, let me show you Dante's house tomorrow morning, and we'll have lunch at Paoli's."

She did not reply at once, but looked at the courts. He had not noticed her cheap hat, her cheap dress, so dreadfully conspicuous among all these smart Parisian gowns. True, men crowded about her when she appeared; but none asked her favours. Perhaps they no longer cared to be rebuffed. Luxuries! Well, she might have them, at a price she had sworn never to pay. Was she a fool? Perhaps.

"Paoli's? I never heard of it. Besides, this is going a little too fast. Is Paoli's fashionable?" she asked.

"It is not. I remember it when sausages and garlic hung from the rafters and you ate from trencher boards and sat on benches three or four hundred years old. The food is good and the Chianti mellow. Please do not be offended because I asked. We Americans——"

"I am not offended. Rather I am pleased at the compliment. Where is this restaurant?"

"In the Via Tavolini—the Way of the Little Tables. Isn't that like a line of poetry?"

"Sausages and garlic. . . . What do you write?"

"I have written a book on art treasures—principally Cellini's. But only savants read it. Perhaps it has sold five hundred copies."

The son of a painter, she thought, who had written a book which only scholars would buy. A bitter wildness surged into her heart. She would have perhaps a week or ten days before her father returned. To play a little, recklessly and carelessly, before the old burden once more sagged her shoulders. Secret but harmless junkets with this American who was vouched for by her only true friends. One fling while her father was away; and at her elbow the means. She knew that she might wander about old Florence for days without meeting an acquaintance, so long as she did not step within the fashionable bounds.

"Dante's house, or at least the spot where his house was," she mused, "and a tavern in the Way of the Little Tables." She rose, having cast the die. "I shall be in the Piazza Vittorio at eleven, by the Savoy entrance. But say nothing to our friends."

A slight push would have toppled Ellison, so great was his astonishment. For a moment there fell upon him the semblance of a dream. The most incredible episode in his life had happened.

"You really will go?"

"I never break a promise."

Later he was to get the full force of this statement.

Lisabetta after half an hour bade the Lucchesis good-bye. They could not prevail upon her to remain and let them drive her home. She really had errands, she declared, and was late. She was in fact literally running away. Now that she had taken the step toward dissipation, however innocuous, she knew that if she remained she would break her promise to Ellison.

With trancelike sensations, Ellison watched her until the hedge obscured her from view. He then saw an object at his feet and stooped for it. It was a small Florentine leather purse. Not quite conscious of what he did, he opened the purse, and three copper pieces of money slid into view. Hers, and not enough for a cab home! She would be walking home, to the outskirts of the city, perhaps. What kind of man was this Peruzzi? He suddenly dropped the purse into a pocket. Mrs. Lucchesi was speaking.

"What did you say to her? It looks to me as if she was running away."

"Certainly nothing I said."

"Did you tell her she was beautiful?"

'I did not. Why should I? A man tells a woman she is beautiful only when the matter is doubtful, and she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"Well, it looks queer. To-morrow night you are to dine with us *en famille*."

"Your special brand of spaghetti," said Lucchesi.

"Ah! Will you do me a favour? Ask Lisabetta Peruzzi."

"What makes you think she will accept?"

"She seemed to be quite a jolly sort; none of the professional beauty about her."

"What did you talk about?"

"Crickets."

"Rita," said Lucchesi, "you write her a note. Tell her there will be only the four of us. . . . Crickets!" Lucchesi's laughter boomed into space. "Rita, she will come. This octogenarian has intrigued her by doing the unexpected. But you, Bob, you tell her to-morrow night that she is beautiful, and break the suspense."

That night Ellison put out the lights and drew a chair to the window, and transferred Lisabetta's purse from one hand to the other many times, as he stared at the brilliant Florentine night. Betta —what a charming diminutive! To fill this purse with all manner of precious stones—or better still, with stars! A pleasant image: Lisabetta's purse filled with stars.

He was conscious of a colossal upheaval in his

ordered affairs, but the true significance lay on the other side of the fog which bemused him.

He had temporarily forgotten all about the Cellini plaque; but Signor Poggioli had not. At this particular moment he was in an attic in the Via Maffia, an attic filled with queer odours, retorts, and little furnaces; and he was exchanging banter with a man in a stained smock.

CHAPTER III

ELLISON entered the Piazza Vittorio at the appointed hour, cynically confident that Lisabetta Peruzzi would not appear. Why should she? Why put herself out for a stranger she had conversed with for perhaps ten minutes? A man wasn't given such luck outside of books. But when he saw the leghorn hat by the Savoy entrance, his cynicism flew out of him and never gained a decent foothold thereafter.

"I have not kept you waiting?"

"But one minute. Let us be getting on. You see, I never go anywhere—with men. We unmarried Italians never have any liberty, you know."

"But you are free."

"Am I?" she said, with an adorable shrug.

"Good heavens, don't tell me that you are en-

gaged to be married and that you are afraid of running into your fiancé? Supposing he challenges me. Pistols and swords, and I a perfect rabbit!" A clever way of asking her if there was anybody else.

"I shall never marry. . . . Look at those scarlet oranges in that green cart!"

A buoyancy pervaded Ellison. She was unattached; and many a woman had sworn never to marry and had.

A sense of buoyancy pervaded her also. For a little while, freedom; the quality of freedom granted hunted things out of season. Even now she must proceed warily, to follow the beaten paths of tourists, for by doing so she was less likely to meet people she knew. She could not take this freedom with a man of her own race; he would not understand her mood and would annoy her with amorous sentiments. Even to be seen with an Italian would invite malicious comment. She knew her little Florentine world, and she held her place in it precariously only because she had never stepped from the appointed

path. But to run about with an American would invite nothing more than shrugs. Americans were amorous only when they loved, and did not generally make a pastime of it, and were jolly and amusing companions. To run about town, doing mad things under the protection of a man who could be trusted. At this moment Ellison meant nothing more to her.

So together they started off for the house of Dante. And Poggioli, who had been observing them from a distance, stroked his blue-black chin. His discovery of them was only an accident; but as he reviewed the situation he was quite pleased with it. It would have to be an infinitely small thing for him not to wring a profit from it. Still, he must find out when and how they had met.

Her gayety drew Ellison's, which needed furbishing in the beginning; but by the time luncheon at Paoli's was over, he was her match in wit and happy recklessness. But he played a shrewd game. He studied Paoli's bill to see that there was no overcharge and gave the waiter the

precise sum that an Italian would have given. In Lisabetta's eyes he was poor, and so he must remain.

That night at the Lucchesi villa, which was south of the Arno, on the Viale Michelangelo, Lisabetta wore a dinner gown, and even Ellison's untrained eye noted the age of it; and yet it seemed to him that her beauty was all the more astounding. There was no diminution to her gayety.

The home-going in the Lucchesi car was something he would remember; man-made and heaven-made stars and the perfume of roses.

The Peruzzi villa was on the way to Fiesole; but in the night all the walls and gates looked alike to Ellison, who could not mark the villa for recollection. He jumped down and helped Lisabetta to alight and unlocked the grille for her.

"What about to-morrow?" he whispered.

"What have you to suggest?"

"Let us hunt singing crickets in the Cascine."

She laughed.

"After all, why not? It will have to be early, for I must be home to lunch."

"Shall I call for you at nine?"

"No; I shall meet you at the park gates at nine."

All that distance on foot, he thought. She would walk from one end of Florence to the other to hunt crickets with him. The pathos of that purse he carried in his pocket! Tragedy under all this gayety; tight-lipped penury. The daughter of a man who was gambling-mad, who would sell his flesh and blood for a gambling stake. He held out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation she placed hers within it.

"Do you think I am beautiful?" she shot at him.

"Are you?" was his immediate return.

Her laughter broke out.

"Good-night, Mr. Ellison. We are going to be friends. Never compliment me. My face has made life somewhat difficult. Until tomorrow."

She closed the gate and sped up the path to the

villa. An elderly female peasant—the one servant—opened the door for her. When the gate opened it rang a bell in the hall.

"Rosa, have you ten lire?" asked Lisabetta.

"*Si, Betta mia.*"

"I may never be able to pay you back."

"But he will pay me, *cara mia,* never fear. I wash, I cook, I clean, I am cheap; he cannot do without me. He will pay me. Do you want the money now?"

"In the morning."

"Did you have a good time?"

Rosa had varied privileges in this house and was permitted to ask questions of her superiors.

"Rosa, I'm afraid I did. Have you ever been mad?"

"*Si.* I am now."

"No, no; I mean the other kind that makes you do things you should not."

"Ah, I was young once! Youth does not loiter. Play while you have youth. Soon your bones will ache when you climb the stairs. But you will always be beautiful; I never was."

"What have you done to that girl?" Mrs. Lucchesi wanted to know as they rolled back to town. "I never saw her so gay."

"Reverse it, and ask what has she done to me. Frankly, I don't know. I'm bewildered. Is she a flirt?"

"Never!"

"Then why is she so agreeable to me?"

"You poor man, has no woman ever told you that you are attractive?"

"That isn't it. She lunches at Paoli's with me; to-morrow morning she is going into the Cascine to hunt singing crickets. You can't tell me it is because I'm attractive. She wants a good time, and I seem to be a safe old codger to have it with."

"You will never win any woman with that utter lack of vanity."

"Do I want to win her? I don't know."

"She is as beautiful in mind as in body. No matter what her father does, nor how he acts, Betta will always be what she is."

"I am ten years older, too."

"Giovanni is eight years older than I. If she were an American?"

"She would have married some duke long ago."

"What brought you to Florence this year?"

"Oh, a rumour about a Cellini plaque; and I don't care a hoot if I never see it," he added savagely.

"Roberto, that's a bad sign."

"Something's wrong with the world," he said; but he laughed afterward.

Ellison kept a diary: one of those bald, unemotional affairs which scholars use to preserve their observations. There was not even an echo of sentiment in the book. It was the minute and precise history of his endeavours for a period covering twelve years. It was filled with the histories of artistic frauds and impostures, and he had been frank enough to jot down his own stumblings. Now came a strange interlude. Ellison began to write down his emotions, day by day. He was in love.

Ellison was not a poet, neither was he a novel-

ist; he had no literary invention. He wrote well and informatively upon subjects he knew something about and was considered brilliant in research. But he knew nothing, or little more than nothing, about the manifestations of love. So no publisher will ever offer to print the emotional phase—in six parts—of his diary. It is probable that he will blot it out some day, when he rereads it coldly. Nevertheless, he suffered greatly as any creative genius would suffer; perhaps more, for he was dumb, somewhat, and each creative genius has his peculiar vent and is able to minimize the agony by transcribing it in ink or paint or marble or music. Ellison had none of these gifts. He could only brood in silence.

CHAPTER IV

THE last night. In the Lucchesi garden there was an ancient marble bench, beside a huge Sicilian oil jar, that gleamed mistily in the dim light of the sickle moon. The perfume of roses and lemon verbena swam in the gently moving air. Ellison sat upon the bench, hunched, with his forearms upon his knees. Out into the night came Lisabetta's voice in song.

A vast fury laid hold of Ellison: fury at his weakness, his lack of courage to put it to the touch. During the war he had faced death calmly enough, yet he dared not tell Lisabetta that he loved her. And after to-night he might never see her again. Half-a-dozen times the words had been ready, and something she did or said had stifled them. She did not want to hear the words, and anticipated them—was that it?

There was steel in her. He had found that

out in these six mad days. If she had set her mind against love and marriage—— Her clothes, her shoes, her purse which he still carried! If there was only some way by which he might give her money! Convention, pride; walls everywhere against a kindly deed.

Silence followed the song, but he was not aware of it, nor of its length.

"Lemon verbena—what an exquisite perfume! Dried, the scent lasts for ages, like lavender. Here is a sprig to remember me by."

It was Lisabetta. He had not heard her approach. There would always be associated with the recollection of this night a few blank spaces during which his mind registered nothing. Between the time he looked up at the sound of her voice and the time he took her into his arms there was mental emptiness. Nothing conscious had impelled him to the act. But finding her in his arms, he kissed her; how many times was another thing beyond remembrance. She took the kisses and the embrace passively.

"I could not help it," he said, letting her go.

Was it a sob he heard? "I love you. Will you be my wife? I know now why I have gone all these years without a woman. I was waiting for you."

"No, no! I am sorry. I did not want it this way. I take all the blame. I have been mad. I am not an irresponsible young girl; I am a woman, and I had no right to forget. A little fling—and now to pay the piper. . . . Wait! I like you better than any other man I have known. You were gentle and merry; you never spoiled a scene by asking questions; there was never the look of the hunter in your eyes. I shall never marry any man—ever."

"Not if you loved him?"

"All the more thoroughly would I reject him—if I loved him."

"But why?"

"There are obstacles."

"Can't I ride over these obstacles?"

"No, dear comrade; only death can do that. This is the end. I return to my prison; but it will not be so bleak as it was yesterday."

"If there were no obstacles?"

"No, no! I have nothing to tell you except that I'm sorry if I have hurt you."

"Hurt me! You absolutely mean all this?"

"Absolutely. You have held me in your arms and kissed me. No other man has or ever shall. I tell you here, before God, that I shall never marry."

"Will you answer me one question?"

"I have answered that already. So good-bye!"

"Am I never to see you again?"

"Never!" And she ran toward the house.

It was flight. She feared the sobs which struggled for utterance. She had thought to play only, and had come to this—love! Lisabetta Peruzzi, who was an outcast! Happiness, and she must not reach for it because she was honest!

Despair and numbness for him. He did not follow her. He knew that the most passionate pleading would not have bent the steel in her.

Even in this short time he had learned to know

that she would not say a thing to-day and reverse it to-morrow. He had lost her, and unless he discovered what was behind her refusal she would always remain lost to him.

In one short week, the world—his world—upside down; and he knew that no labour, however furious and persistent, would ever turn the world right side up. Her father, or it might be something about her own history. If he but knew what! One could not surmount obstacles which eluded; one could not climb stairs made of fog. To go to her father would be folly; the act would serve only to reënforce the steel in Lisabetta.

Poggioli! Poggioli had the history of every Florentine of note at his tongue's end. He would know all about Sandro Peruzzi. And then——

Next day, as he finished his luncheon and strolled into the lounge, a notion in his head to pack up and return to America, he saw Poggioli, who appeared to be excited.

"He is in town; arrived this morning. He will

be at home between two and half after. Evidently his little trip to Monte Carlo was not prosperous. He was in a bit of temper."

"He gambles?"

"Yes; but he will not sell the plaque. Eh? They will gamble their souls away, but how they cling to heirlooms!"

"Who is the man?" asked Ellison, as he took up his hat and cane.

"His name is Sandro Peruzzi, and his villa is on the way to Fiesole."

"What's he do?" inquired Ellison, quietly, though his ears hummed.

"A gentleman with a modest income. He had an ancestor who was a captain in the Vatican in the time of Clement VII. This captain was given the plaque originally."

"So? Well, let us be on our way."

To see Lisabetta; the plaque was nothing; Cellini was no longer, and never would be again, a subject of importance. Sandro Peruzzi! The desire, inexplicable, to laugh came into Ellison's throat.

"Remember," warned Poggioli, "don't offer him any sum for it. See what he would take for it if he ever decided to sell, and under no circumstance permit him to learn that you have wealth. Be interested in the plaque only as a writer."

"You can trust me. Is there anything peculiar about Peruzzi?"

"Peculiar? Nothing, except that he is a miser and a gambler. True, he eloped with his wife, who was a great Roman lady. Her family disowned her, and Peruzzi has ceased to exist in their minds. If you mean mystery or scandal, there is nothing that I know of."

"Miser and gambler." Ellison laughed. "That must be the most exquisite torture. He lives alone?"

"He has a daughter, and keeps her pinned to the wall. I suspect, but I don't know, that his daughter refuses to marry the rich men he parades before her. So rumour has it that she has but one pair of shoes the year, and the girl fit to grace the house of a prince! I know these things because I've managed to get into the con-

fidence of the housekeeper. Never any quarrels. Peruzzi is always suave and gentle and the girl is always cold and quiet. Two rapiers, feeling out each other in the dark. Eh?"

"Peruzzi and the Roman woman were married?"

"Certainly. Florence accepted her. She lived but two years."

Then where was the obstacle? What was it that made it impossible for Lisabetta Peruzzi ever to marry?

CHAPTER V

ELLISON was astonished to find the Peruzzi salon admirably appointed. The walls were marked by excellent copies of Botticelli, Lippo Lippi, Del Sarto, Holbein, and Dürer. A handsome Samarkand partly covered the old red tiles of the floor. The few pieces of furniture were gems. Ellison possessed the first quality of observation; a glance told him whether a room was right or wrong. This room was about perfect.

An old woman had answered the bell and had conducted them to the salon, where they sat down upon a little lounge, awaiting the entrance of the master. Was Lisabetta in the house? Ellison's heart shook at the thought of meeting her again. Last night he had held her in his arms and kissed her.

Peruzzi entered and closed the door behind him. He was a handsome, dapper old man, with

white hair and white moustaches and benign of countenance, the last person to whom one might apply the sinister titles of miser and gambler. Ellison scrutinized the face keenly; not a line anywhere to suggest cruelty. He recollected Lisabetta's shoes; and he knew at once that Peruzzi's benignity would never deceive him. It might be, though, that Peruzzi was brutal only when the fury of the gambler seized him.

"Signor Ellison, the American authority on Cellini," announced Poggioli, bowing.

Peruzzi nodded coldly and consulted his watch.

"You wish to see the plaque?"

"If it will be agreeable to you."

"On condition that you will make no mention of it in your next edition."

"I can't promise that."

"Then what you do not see you cannot vouch for," said Peruzzi.

"You will not show it?"

"Only on the condition I have made. I do not want the commissioners entering my house."

"But they would not confiscate it."

"There is always the possibility. My ancestor states that he received the plaque from Clement VII. But there is no proof that he did not steal it. That leaves a wide opening for the Government."

"I agree to the condition."

The hunter took precedence over the lover, and Ellison felt that he must see the plaque.

"Poggioli, this is the last time."

"But, signor, this gentleman——"

"Come into my study," interrupted Peruzzi. "Time flies, and I have only a quarter of an hour."

Ellison entered behind Poggioli, his ears strained in vain to catch the sound of footsteps above. Silence reigned there.

For this reason: when her father had guests, Lisabetta invariably remained upstairs, and nothing could lure her down except the closing of the garden grille, which, when opened or shut, tinkled a bell in the hall. She had heard the

first bell and had flown to her room, bolting the door.

From a battered safe Peruzzi drew a magnifying glass and two books which had the appearance of ledgers, very old. He laid the three objects upon the reading table and opened one of the books, indicating that he wished his visitor to read.

"A beautiful old book," said Ellison, warming. "What is it?"

"My ancestor's diary. He was something of a scribbler. What I wish you to read, with the glass, is the page I have indicated."

Ellison scrutinized the page thoroughly and surreptitiously compared the adjoining page. The ink had faded to a faint blond and the old Italian was rather difficult to decipher. Search as he might, he could find no interpolations, no indications that the page had been tampered with. Here was the brief history of how the Cellini plaque had come into the possession of Captain Peruzzi. Ellison, tolerably familiar

with old paper and ink, knew that the history was genuine. His old enthusiasms awoke; his skepticism vanished. He even forgot that Peruzzi was Lisabetta's father.

"And the plaque itself?" he said.

Reluctantly Peruzzi opened the second book. It was a false book, built to hold the plaque against a background of white velvet. Ellison stepped forward, thrilled. Never had he seen anything more exquisite. Green as the pulp of a grape; the blank centre was dulled, the carving highly polished, representing a mythological hunting scene, rather licentious, the usual Cellini inspiration.

"Extraordinary!" cried Ellison. "May I carry it over to the light?"

"Certainly."

Ellison inspected the plaque under the glass. If this was not Cellini, he silently argued, then it was by Cellini's equal. He noted but one flaw, in the heel of one of the hunters. But he had no notion to comment upon this flaw. Here was Cellini. He was sure of it. Only a great

artist could have produced this plaque. Never in this world would the Italian Government permit this gem to reside outside a museum, did they know that it existed. Cellini in chrysoprase, and he had given his promise not to make a record of what he saw! He saw some justice in Peruzzi's attitude. Ellison returned the plaque to the table.

"It is the most beautiful bit I've ever laid eyes on. It is far more beautiful than the Viennese salt cellar. Is there a price on it?"

Peruzzi laughed softly.

"I will give you thirty thousand for it!" cried Ellison, now fully in the grip of the collector's passion. "Thirty thousand dollars—now!"

"It is not for sale," Peruzzi reiterated. "When I die the plaque goes to the Crown. You want it? Why shouldn't I? In all the world I have but two treasures, and this is one of them."

Ellison knew what the other was, and grew cold—Lisabetta! And for a while he had forgotten her!

"I thank you, signor, for this pleasure," he said. "I have given my word to make no public mention of what I have seen. But if ever you should be tempted to sell——"

"When I die the plaque becomes the world's." Again Peruzzi consulted his watch.

"Well?" said Poggioli, as he and Ellison entered the tram.

"Thanks, Poggioli. You have given me a great pleasure. I would have crossed the Atlantic ten times to see a thing like that. Cellini in chrysoprase! It is unbelievable; yet the plaque and the document would pass in any court."

"You believe that writing to be genuine?" asked the agent.

"Yes; you can't reproduce that kind of paper. We have what we call deckle edge; but that does not darken with age like the old stuff, which ages all over the same. Even without the documentary evidence, the plaque is enough for me. Where is the man alive to do such work?"

"But you—to offer him thirty thousand that

way!" said Poggioli reproachfully. "Now, if ever he wishes to sell, the price will be sixty."

"I couldn't help it. Good Lord, Poggioli, I must have that plaque! Honourably, of course; honourably. What will his thoughts be about the plaque when he needs gambling money? There's the one hope. I hope he goes broke. The sheer beauty of it, and the incomparable cutting!"

"I knew you would be pleased. He asked me to the villa one day to consult me about a canvas. I told him that it was only so-so; and before I left he showed me the plaque and the record."

"I am pleased; and we shall stop at the American Express. I am going to cash a small draft in your favour. Thirty thousand stands. Not because I believe the plaque worth that, but because I want it. Would he accept my check?"

"If he were permitted to cable your bankers for your rating. Certainly he would have to protect himself. But would he dare cash your check? No. He would have to have cash—

keep himself clear—what you would call an alibi."

Ellison knew that his conscience was sound; but what would happen if the plaque came to his hand? There was no denying the truth, he would smother his conscience and leg it for the first ship out. He knew conscience to be a fallow thing until the test. The unutterable beauty of that plaque—and the beauty of Lisabetta!

Once in his room, he sat down and wrote Lisabetta a love letter, full of stumblings and paradoxes and mixed metaphors, and yet a beautiful love letter. Lisabetta had to open it to learn who had sent it. Dry-eyed, she held it to her heart for a space, then returned it without comment. Six other letters followed; but she knew now, and sent them back unopened.

For three afternoons and evenings Ellison hung about the villa. But he never saw her, for she feared that he might be nigh and never went abroad.

In a burst of anger Ellison decided to return

to America. He had offered her the highest honour a man can bestow upon a woman—love and marriage. She would have none of him. So be it. He booked to sail the following Saturday. On Wednesday night he packed. As he slammed the lid of his steamer trunk and locked it, someone knocked on the door.

You know what lover's hope is. He ran to the door, hoping—and discovered Poggioli.

CHAPTER VI

POGGIOLI entered, closed the door and laid a finger against his lips. He was visibly excited. Under one arm was a package.

"Well?" said Ellison.

"We've hooked him!" said Poggioli in a jubilant whisper.

"What? Who?"

"Peruzzi." Poggioli exhibited the package. "Here's the Cellini plaque. But I must carry back your draft this very night, and you must leave Florence in the morning."

Ellison was no simpleton. He trusted no agent fully. All of them would turn thieves if the rewards were large enough.

"Then he'll take my draft without consulting my bankers?"

Poggioli smiled, laid his package on the dresser, and took from his wallet a letter addressed to

himself. Ellison read that his bankers would honour his drafts for any amount up to five hundred thousand dollars. Poggioli had sent for this information in 1919, when he had purchased the Carlo Dolci for Ellison. Ellison tossed back the letter, uttering no comment. Poggioli had been within his rights.

"I showed him that letter and he was satisfied."

"When did you close this deal?" asked Ellison, still cold.

"About an hour ago."

"And he trusted you with the plaque before he saw my check? Don't like the looks of it, Poggioli."

"He does not want you to be known in the deal. If the Italian Government should learn and were able to approach you, Peruzzi would face a good deal of trouble. I told him that you would give thirty thousand. At first he began to curse me for disturbing him. Suddenly he surrendered. From outside sources I have learned that he was badly hit at Monte

Carlo and that he has mortgaged his next year's income. He had to sell something to live."

Ellison thought of Lisabetta's shoes. The mind, touched with love, is never a keen mind, and is not fit to sit in judgment upon anything. Two treasures, he mused bitterly. Well, if he could not have the chief, he would take the secondary. Or was Lisabetta the chief treasure? All the better if the plaque were first.

"Let me see the plaque. If it is genuine, I'll buy it."

So Poggioli uncovered the package and revealed the Cellini plaque in its odd setting. Ellison remembered the flaw in the heel of the hunter, sought for and found it.

"Where is the evidence from the diary?"

Poggioli immediately surrendered it. Ellison studied the page word for word. It was the page he had seen. He knew this because he was able to identify three broken words and a spatter of ink from an upward stroke of the quill.

Ellison drew a chair to the bed and fell to studying the plaque from all angles. Suddenly

he knew that he was going to buy it. For years his soul had craved for what had seemed an impossibility—a bit of the old scoundrel's art. Here it lay, a thing of incredible beauty. The flowing tresses of the hunters, the expression of masculine activity, the foliage—perfection. He rose.

"I'll buy it," he said.

"Make the draft payable to me. He cannot touch a check; he must have the cash. I take the check to him to-night, and to-morrow I deposit it. When it is paid, I turn the money over to him."

"His risk, not mine," said Ellison. Ordinarily he would have objected to this procedure; but he disliked Peruzzi. "If he trusts you, I suppose I must."

Poggioli shrugged.

"You will receive at your bank a note from Peruzzi, saying, 'Thank you.'"

Ellison wrote the draft and Poggioli inspected it thoroughly. The man suddenly expanded; he smiled; he executed a wide gesture.

"All my life I have lived from hand to mouth. Now I shall live like a prince. I stole the plaque and the document. Every man for himself in this wicked world."

Astounded to the point of speechlessness, Ellison stared at the man.

Finally he said, "You—what?"

"Stole it." Poggioli bowed amiably. "And if you make any trouble, you will find yourself accessory to the theft. Peruzzi will remember that you called with me and wanted the plaque, and offered thirty thousand."

"You damned scoundrel!" And Ellison flew at him pinning the rogue to the wall. "The plaque and the document go back to Peruzzi this night. Give me that check or I'll throttle you!"

Suddenly his hand relaxed. A stupendous notion had popped into his head. To return the plaque and the document in the autumn, upon condition that Peruzzi should permit his daughter to marry where she chose and that he would never come begging to her, that he would drop out of her life completely. Here was a notion

worth ten times thirty thousand. Lisabetta was within reach.

"I'll keep the plaque; but clear out before I change my mind."

Poggioli readjusted his collar, sent Ellison a calculating glance, and departed, chuckling inaudibly.

CHAPTER VII

ON A bright afternoon in November, Ellison sat in the reading room of his club and gave up trying to read. Lisabetta was too strongly in his thoughts. She was wherever he was; and so long as he lived this condition would exist. He had written. How many letters had he written? He had lost count. But none of these letters had come back, there having been no return address. Yet she could have remedied that, by putting a query to the Lucchesis, who know his several American addresses. Had she read and destroyed the letters, or was she keeping them unopened against the day of his probable return to Florence? Well, Saturday would see him on the way to Naples.

The thought that tortured him more than any other was this: Had she married secretly, been disillusioned, and was the man still living?

This was persistent because it was the only logical deduction.

When he kissed her that night in the Lucchesi garden, she had not repulsed him. She was Italian; she would have been furious if she had not cared. So that is why the love of her did not die out for lack of something to feed upon, but grew and grew, until he knew that he must see her or lose all interest in life.

A hand fell upon his shoulder and he looked up.

"Hello, George! Sit down; glad to see you. When did you get back from abroad?"

"Last week. Can't stop but a moment," said Atteridge, an amateur collector of porcelains and jade snuff bottles. "How long since were you in Florence?"

Ellison sat up alertly.

"Last spring."

"Well," said Atteridge, smiling, "if I know anything about you, you're going to sail for Italy in a jiffy."

"Go on."

"Well, you're a Cellini bug. I'm going to tell

you that in October I saw a Cellini that will fairly crack your eyeballs when you see it."

"Ah, yes. Where is this precious thing?"

"In Florence. But the old bird won't sell."

"A cup?" asked Ellison, with lips suddenly gone dry.

"No; a plaque in chrysoprase, of extraordinary beauty."

"What's the subject?"

"A mythological hunting scene."

"Proofs?"

"The old bird had the documents. Oh, the thing is genuine; but kept under cover so the Government won't know."

Ellison burst into laughter.

"You don't believe me?" said Atteridge, reproachfully.

Ellison rose.

"Of course I do. I'm the most grateful man you ever saw. What's the old bird's name?"

"Peruzzi."

"How did you find out about the plaque?"

"Through a chap named Poggioli. Some-

body said he knew where I could find some old Sèvres. I was interested in the plaque only on your account. But the thing is not for sale."

"George, everything is for sale. Love, even, when you buy it with love. I'm going out for a walk. I'm stuffed with tobacco smoke."

Ellison left the club for the Avenue, deliriously happy. Everything; he had the whole story. As a bolt of lightning reveals the spokes in a wheel at night, so had this bolt revealed Lisabetta's reason. Atteridge, the one chance in the wide world! From no other channel could the truth have come. Atteridge, hunting for Sèvres and falling upon a chrysoprase plaque! A conspiracy as clever and impregnable as human ingenuity could devise, gone to pot on a mere fluke! He understood. Why, Lisabetta had been utterly lost to him!

Rooked, beautifully rooked! If the world heard about it, his Cellini prestige would become something to laugh at. Pretended robbery, to keep the victim forever away from the Peruzzi villa! And yet there was the plaque; the quality

of its beauty remained unimpaired; it was still an object of glory. No machinery had brought out those lovely bodies; nothing other than the tools of a master carver. Peruzzi and Poggioli in the hollow of his hand! For five years Poggioli had been ripening him for this! To how many dupes had Poggioli taken a stolen plaque? Peruzzi the victim! Ellison laughed. Had he not been in love with Lisabetta, Poggioli would never have carried away that check. He at least would not have been duped. Yes, he was greedy; but never to the point of dishonesty.

So that was it! Lisabetta, loyalty and pride; a hell on earth for her who was as honest as the sun! Lisabetta could not marry because she knew her father to be a clever blackleg; because she herself was honest. Trapped, for she could not go to the police without inviting dishonour and perhaps imprisonment. Knowing that this business was going on, she would be in law an accessory.

Was it chrysoprase? He would find out by tapping the source. He had the whip hand; and

he would lay it about with a will, remembering Lisabetta's shoes.

Peruzzi pretended not to recognize his visitor; but inwardly he was amused. Accusations which could not be proved; threats which would not be fulfilled. Even if the contest became serious, Lisabetta would change that. How had he found out? No matter; being found out happened to everybody. Which would be the stronger, his pride or his love? However, the end would be what he, Peruzzi, decided it should be.

Now Ellison's mind was glowing; but the lust for vengeance was something to try out rather than to thrust home.

The rogue was Lisabetta's father, to a certain extent inviolable. For Lisabetta's sake he would play a little comedy, then hurl the thunderbolt, for truly he had one for Signor Peruzzi.

"I have not the pleasure——" began Peruzzi.

Ellison interrupted him with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, you have. Don't you remember?

I came with Poggioli to see the Cellini plaque. It was in May."

"The plaque? Oh—ah! And you wish to see it again?" Peruzzi smiled. "I still refuse to sell it."

"You have it still?"

"*Per Bacco!* But last spring the replica was stolen."

"You had a replica?" said Ellison, pretending to be astonished. "Do you mean to tell me that a thing like that can be reproduced?"

"A matter of chemistry. A steel die, transfusion of certain crystals, artificially stained by an impregnation of green salt of nickel, some cutting, and you have a replica of the Cellini plaque."

Ellison caught hold of the word "replica."

"You mean copy."

"I mean replica," replied Peruzzi, easily.

The old fellow was baiting him. Only Cellini —and Cellini was dead—could produce a replica. To bait a man suggested reserve forces on the

part of the baiter. Presently he, Ellison, would bring these reserves to the surface.

"But the record was not stolen?"

"Fortunately, no."

"Would you mind showing me the two again?"

Peruzzi sent his visitor a shrewd glance. The young wolf was baiting the old tiger? All the more amusing.

"Come with me."

"But supposing the record page had been also stolen?" suggested Ellison.

"I could easily remedy that. A camera, an old sheet of paper of like age and quality, a retracing with a specially prepared ink. . . . The ingenuity of dishonest men is past belief, signor"—gravely.

"But always somewhere along the crooked road they stumble." He had to admire the old rogue.

As Peruzzi went into the safe for the plaque and the record, his thoughts were shifting rapidly. Whatever else happened, there would

be no police hereabouts. For the first time in his life he saw Lisabetta as a buffer instead of a future source of income. Accusations and threats, but not particularly harsh, because the fool was in love with Lisabetta. And what was more, Lisabetta was in love with the fool. For one day, he had attempted to open one of Ellison's letters, and Lisabetta had sprung upon him with the rage of a tigress.

Ellison leisurely inspected the plaque and the record. Both were identical with those he possessed. Somewhere in Florence was a great artist. Not even chrysoprase, yet fit to be set among crown jewels.

"Suppose we drop the camouflage?" he said.

"Perfectly agreeable to me. How did you find out?" Peruzzi sat down.

"A man named Atteridge saw this plaque and reported it to me."

"And you want your thirty thousand?"

"I want Lisabetta."

"Lisabetta is worth a million."

"Who did this work?"

"I. Cellini? Bah! What did he ever turn out more beautiful than that plaque? But if I had brought it into the world as mine, how much would I have got for it? Perhaps a hundred American dollars. But as Cellini I get thirty thousand. Experience is a series of eliminations; little by little it takes the born fool out of us. This experience will be good for you. Oh, once I had beautiful dreams. But in the end I grew to hate humanity. Humanity threw failure into my face, so I struck back."

"You're a great humorist, too."

"If you see the humour of it, there's hope. Sheepheads!"

"Thanks."

"Oh, but you are a lamb yet." Peruzzi laughed. "*Per Bacco!* What dullards honest men are! What a comedy, what a series of comedies, with these learned fools who know so much! I have rooked you. What are you going to do about it? Each of you hiding your plaque for fear of getting me into trouble with the authorities! Haven't you too done something

dishonourable? You took the plaque from Poggioli, though he claimed he had stolen it. Wolf eat wolf. I have never rooked the innocent, only the greedy."

"Haven't you rooked Lisabetta out of her right to happiness?"

"She will come into her own. You say that the rooker stumbles. Where have I stumbled?"

"In misjudging me. I am not afraid of ridicule."

Peruzzi puckered his brows.

"Meaning?"

"That I do not fear publicity."

"If you expose me, there is my daughter, Lisabetta. Do you believe you ran about with her without my knowledge? She was the lure."

"That is a lie." The words were spoken calmly.

The men turned their heads to behold Lisabetta in the doorway, pale but composed. To Ellison her beauty had become ethereal. The shock of seeing her over, he ran to her; but she repelled him with a palm.

"God knows I'm sorry!" he said.

"This hour had to come," she replied wearily. "It would have come before had I known you were to be the victim. Lure I was not."

"My child, you were; but you did not know it. Association with you means love," said Peruzzi.

"Except yours."

"Ah, but you don't understand. I am a creator. When something of mine is complete, I lose all interest in it. Ask any sculptor, painter, or novelist." Peruzzi leaned back in his chair, pyramiding his fingers. "If chrysoprase had been a popular stone, I could have made a fortune with my amalgamation devices. But chrysoprase is a stone almost unknown. I studied art and chemistry at the same time. I was considered brilliant. Well, young man, it looks as if the family skeleton is to remain in the closet."

"No. For her sake you shall have only your vanity pricked. There is still some born fool in you. You are going to agree to certain condi-

tions, or this skeleton shall rattle all over Europe."

"In spite of my daughter?"

"For her sake alone. Do you love me?" Ellison turned to Lisabetta.

"Yes," said Lisabetta. "But I give you up utterly. I refuse to marry you and have my father bleed you."

"If I can tame him?"

Lisabetta leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. To look upon the man would be to weaken.

"How am I to be tamed?" asked Peruzzi. This was a scene after his heart's desire—the rooker and the rooked.

"I shall advertise in all the Continental newspapers, warning those who have purchased a Cellini plaque of you that they have been imposed upon, that the plaque is a fraud."

"But, nevertheless, wonderful," said Peruzzi. "But I had not thought of publicity from that angle. We have to risk something, of course. You spoke of conditions, I believe."

He took out a cheroot, broke it carefully in two and adjusted one half to a holder. He lit the object of this tender consideration and blew a billow of smoke into the air. Millions in the family, and had not that been the main object? Here was Lisabetta come to heel without realizing it, for she would not have the strength to resist. And this love-lorn fool would only threaten; he would not act. A comfortable harbour, after all these years of labour and excitement, and Monte Carlo yearly.

"The conditions are——"

But Lisabetta interrupted, "Not for my sake!"

"She inherits that from me," said Peruzzi. "We never bend. But we must have those conditions."

Turning swiftly, Ellison brought his fist down upon the plaque, shattering it. Then he cast the old book with the record into the fire. Next he ransacked the safe, bringing out wax and steel dies. The wax went into the fire and he beat the steel die with the poker.

"You are an energetic animal," was Peruzzi's comment; "and wasteful. The true die is still behind my forehead."

"Attend me!" said Ellison, somewhat out of breath. "On the first of January and on the first of July you will receive each year you live five thousand dollars. On the day you step foot in America, or send an emissary, or write to your daughter, I shall broadcast the whole story, with a photograph of my plaque, and end all future payments." To Lisabetta he said, "He is your father. To hold him will be enough. To ruin him utterly would not be safe."

"There is gray matter under that skull of yours. It only amused me to rook fools; but if I took up rooking seriously——" In a little while, he mused, this fool would soften; and there would be additional checks. Besides, Lisabetta, with her high regard for morality, the beaten paths of life, bored him. "*Ebbène, figlia mia,* what do you say? Ten thousand a year will make me a virtuous and penitent man."

Lisabetta's glance travelled from her father's face, now illumined by a sardonic smile, to Ellison's, tense with appeal. To face life alone again, amid these lawless adventures! Ellison offered her happiness, the supreme happiness of loving and being loved. But she knew her father and his restless mentality; she knew that at this very moment he was planning some coup by which to impose upon Ellison's generosity.

Happiness within reach and not daring to touch it! How could she marry him and some day bring shame into his house? She turned her cheek to the wall.

Ellison went to her, led her out of the study and closed the door. What he said to her, who shall ask? Whatever it was, it was conqueror's talk; for in the end she went into his arms.

"Oh, how weak I am," she whispered, "when I should be strong! Didn't you follow me that day to the Cascine?"

"Of course I did! Do you now believe in the luck of singing crickets?"

"You know I do."

He pressed her head to his shoulder, and so they stood for a long time.

There was a sound. The shade of Cellini stood in the doorway, his eyes sparkling with mockery.

"What do you want?" demanded Ellison, roughly.

The amiable old scoundrel flourished his dead cheroot.

"A match."

PART II

CHAPTER VIII

LATE on a November afternoon a man hurriedly turned into the Via Mafia in the mediæval city of Florence. With one hand holding the brim of his Fedora and the other gripping his collar, he made headway against the bitter wind till he reached a certain doorway. This he entered and mounted three flights of stairs, worn hollow by the passing and repassing of thousands of feet and still the resting place of some of last summer's dust. One does not scrub stairways in the Via Mafia.

The man, reaching the loft, knocked peculiarly upon one of the doors: the unadorned bleakness of the hallway accented the blows. Presently the door opened.

"Ah!" said the tenant. "I thought it would be you, Poggioli. Come in. But sit down for a moment."

"Yes, Master."

All about the room were retorts and stocky little furnaces and shelves sagging under many-coloured bottles. One of the furnaces sent forth an angry glow. It was not, however, in competition with nature this afternoon; Florence was besieged by the vanguard of winter's cohorts; and Sandro Peruzzi, being a chemist of extraordinary attainments, did not like charcoal braziers with their subtle and noxious gases.

Peruzzi returned to his table, put a jeweller's glass to his eye, and scrutinized an object which lay upon an engraver's pad. Suddenly he leaned back and yawned, and took the glass from his eye and stared into space.

Poggioli eyed him solemnly. He admired and feared this little man; admired the amazing genius—to the world unknown—and feared the *diablerie* behind it. He called Peruzzi Master not in sycophancy; he applied the term precisely as the pupils of Michelangelo had applied it. Poggioli was one of those human beings who pandered to the artistic obsessions of rich collec-

tors. Business that autumn and so far this winter had been poor, for his gloves, his spats, and his necktie exhaled the odour of benzine. Peruzzi no longer paid him fat commissions.

"Poggioli, come here." As the visitor approached, Peruzzi exclaimed: "Phew! When will you learn to walk a few miles before bringing that infernal odour up here? Someday you will explode and ruin me."

"One cannot buy attar of roses with lire which are no longer made of silver."

"True. Look at this. What would you call it?"

"Why, it is an emerald!"

"About as fine an imitation as human ingenuity can make. Colour and cleavage; eh?"

"It is wonderful!" Poggioli saw the days of opulence returning. For two years affairs in Florence had been at nadir. Sandro Peruzzi had had a wing clipped; he could hop and bump about, but he could no longer fly. "What are you going to do with it, Master?"

"Throw it away."

"What?"

"Because it is as yet a beautiful failure. Drop it six inches, and it shatters. What appear to be cleavages are merely cracks, accomplished after the methods of ancient Chinese glazers. Still, it has kept me from being bored. The diamond, the pearl, the ruby, the sapphire—we can give nature a drubbing there. But the emerald! Nature laughs at us. She puts in little criss-crosses that defy us. Look at this." Peruzzi opened a jewel case. Poggioli gasped. "There is a necklace worth a million lire, present rate of exchange . . . if it would stick together." Peruzzi stood up, put his monocle in his eye, and took off his begrimed smock. "I am bored, damnably bored."

"Couldn't we make another Cellini plaque?"

"The die is mutilated."

"But here?" Poggioli touched his forehead.

"'Tis a game played," said Peruzzi, wearily. "I had hopes for this emerald. A papal ring . . . a series of papal rings; but I have failed. And then a strange thing has happened to me.

Because I am sure of ten thousand American dollars a year from my impeccable son-in-law, even gambling fails me. It was the chucking Ruin under the chin and dodging her blow that gave Monte Carlo its charm. I go broke at the Casino; and I know that on January first I shall receive five thousand, and on July first five thousand more. So long as I live—conditionally."

"What more do you want?" demanded the bewildered Poggioli.

Peruzzi began to pace the room. He broke a cheroot in two and did not take the trouble to thrust the half into his holder. The pungent blue smoke trailed and swirled as he continued to pace.

"For having sold nine spurious Cellini plaques in chrysoprase, my son-in-law has put me in a cage. If I sell another plaque, I lose everything; I am published in the newspapers. I cannot hold any communication with my daughter. I can never go to America, which is so rich in gullible fools. Monotony."

"Do you suppose Signor Ellison is having you watched?"

"Indirectly. I have to go to the American Express to cash my drafts. He's no fool, that Roberto. Giovanni Lucchesi is his friend; and I am always running into him. There is an ironical suggestion in the way he tips his hat that he knows the whole story."

"But, Master, it was the way you wanted it: your daughter married to a rich man."

"We want what we haven't—always. Sometimes I am of a mind to toss the ten thousand into the gutter and return to my old habits. You to find the gull and I to twist its neck."

"But ten thousand a year!" said Poggioli, doubtfully. "If I had that . . . "

"Mine is a creative mind," interrupted Peruzzi; "yours mirrors what I create. But I understand your nascent agitation. As matters stand you are sure of one good meal a day, whether I am in Florence or in Monte Carlo. You see, I feel the trap. So long as my son-in-law has *his* Cellini plaque and the document which assures

the genuineness of the same, he has me on the hip. I have never confessed it before, but he has beaten me on two points: he controls my freedom of action and has Lisabetta, my daughter, where I cannot reach her sympathies. Poggioli, that plaque was a beautiful thing."

"Master, Cellini could not have done better."

"Cellini? Bah! He was an author, not a sculptor. Even the artificial chrysoprase has fooled experts. I am not only a great artist; I am a great chemist, too."

"That emerald necklace . . . "

"*Zitto!* I am an artist, Poggioli; I am not a thief. What I have sold was mine, done out of my brain and by my hand. I sold nine chrysoprase plaques by Sandro Peruzzi; I called them Cellini because my sense of humour is keen. Nine men have paid considerable sums for a thing of rare beauty; nine men, including my son-in-law, who were temporarily dishonest: for while I was cheating them, they were cheating the Italian Government in thought. Droll, eh? To steal is to take something which does not

belong to you. I sold that which was mine under an assumed name; if I hadn't my pay would not have been commensurate with my talents." Poggioli laughed. "That is what I miss principally—laughter. I have nothing and nobody to laugh at."

Poggioli held a glove to his nose, and wagged his head dismally. "Couldn't you paint, Master?"

Peruzzi whirled upon the man. "What?" he cried, savagely. "Paint Botticellis for you to sell? Imitate some one? I am Sandro Peruzzi: what I offer to the public is mine, mentally and physically."

"No offense. Would your daughter come to you if you were ill?"

"She might, but her husband's pocketbook would not. Poggioli, my intellect has begun to decay; else, long before this I should have found a way out of the trap. I am not half so furious against my clever son-in-law as I am against myself. To gamble with money—pah! But to

gamble with fate: that was the wine which invigorated my blood."

"Is there no way of getting Signor Ellison's plaque?"

"He will have it buried in the deepest vault in his bank. We respect each other's intellect. On the day he married Lisabetta he warned me not to waste any time trying to recover the plaque I'd sold him. He said it would be in his vault."

"Did he declare the plaque to the American customs?"

"How could he without exposing me?"

"Then, Master, we may feel assured that he passed the plaque through without declaring it."

"Ah! I had forgotten. Poggioli, you have been forbidden the villa; you are permitted to visit me here only when you have valuable information to impart."

"That is true"—dolefully.

"What brought you here to-day?"

"There is an American in Florence."

"Ah!"

"He is selling typewriters."

"What the devil . . . "

"Ostensibly selling typewriters."

"And something questionable on the side?"

"Adventuresome. He carries trinkets across the Atlantic."

"A gem smuggler? Pah! Understand me, Poggioli, I'll have no meddling with anything like that. The game must be my kind of a game; art must have its place of distinction. It is not selling a Cellini plaque; it's drubbing the fool that counts with me. A fool who believes he is getting the best of me, of Sandro Peruzzi's poverty; who believes he is taking away from me something that twists my heart and fills me with despair."

"Master, this man was lately a customs inspector at the Port of New York."

Peruzzi halted. "*Per Bacco!* Let me think." He began pacing once more, lighting the other half of his cheroot. At the end of a quarter of an hour he stopped before Poggioli. "I shall

always remember this favour. To-night, we shall dine like gods. I have credit now; I am the father-in-law of Roberto Ellison, the American millionaire. Truth is, my roots have taken hold here in Florence. Tear them up, and I should wither. So long as Ellison has the power to throw me under the light of publicity—and he will use this power if I give him the chance—my freedom is gone. I care naught for Paris or London, where I could begin anew. I must play the game here. I must have my little villa out toward Fiesole, my familiar haunts. I am fifty-eight. Do not mistake me. My son-in-law is a man; and I admire him for his cleverness. It is this fact which makes me restive. My soul longs to prove to him that I am cleverer than he is. When I accomplish this fact, I shall offer him my hand. Does this smuggler look and act like a gentleman?"

"He is staying at the Savoy, and dresses for dinner at night."

"He has taken you into his confidence?"

"No. But he likes champagne."

Peruzzi laughed. "Which has as many words in it as bubbles. Poggioli, I'm beginning to think that you are an artist, too, in your humble way."

This compliment warmed Poggioli. "I thought maybe you might use this information."

"A notion is in the state of fermentation."

In a dim corner of the laboratory was an object covered with heavy canvas. Peruzzi eyed it for a moment as if speculating, then crooked his finger, bidding Poggioli to follow him. Peruzzi threw off the canvas, revealing a small but sturdy safe. Poggioli had seen it before, but knew that something astounding was about to be discovered to him. Peruzzi knelt, opened the safe, and drew out what appeared to be a roll of loose chamois.

"Poggioli, I am taking you into my confidence because I feel that in a little while we shall resume our amusing occupation—plucking the learned gulls. The more learned the gull, the greater the sport in bringing him down. How many Cellini plaques did we sell?"

"Nine." Poggioli trembled.

"Two more than my quick-witted son-in-law is aware of. Four Londoners and five Americans. We might have had Germany and Austria on the list but for the war. Each with a Cellini plaque; and all of them as still as little mice, who still show the plaque secretly to their most intimate friends, swearing them never to speak of what they have seen. Eh? Can you think of anything more droll than that?"

The two men laughed.

"I made twelve, Poggioli," said the Master, as he began to unwind the chamois; "and here are the remaining three, ready for such gulls as shortly you shall bring to me. Look at them, and then tell me how wonderful Cellini was!"

"You have a plan, Master?"

"In fermentation. Have a cheroot."

Poggioli accepted the cheroot gravely. He knew that he was being offered a signal honour. Peruzzi rarely offered his villainous black cheroots. What a mind! thought Poggioli. He had given the man a phrase, and the whole possibility had formed in that mind instantly. As

with the Hindu magician, the seed planted, the corn rose immediately. What Peruzzi meant by fermentation was that at present he saw no way of going forward with this ingenious notion.

But trust him to find a way. Had he not always found the way? Poggioli was quite certain that if he dumped a cartload of Carrara chips at Peruzzi's doorway, the morrow would reveal them gathered into the graces of Daphne.

But no man was perfect; and the Master still missed the basic truth. Not his son-in-law but his daughter had upset the basket. But for her, Signor Ellison would have gone his way, hugging alike *his* Cellini plaque and his delusion. Still, Signor Ellison was clever; he, Poggioli, had not been his agent for several years without acquiring this knowledge; but it was Lisabetta who had tied her father's hands.

What a game it had been and possibly would be again! He would once more lead the victim to Peruzzi, who would refuse to sell the plaque; then he, Poggioli, would steal it and sell it by stealth. Jovian! His part, of course, had been

enacted calculatingly for money; Peruzzi, having had his vengeance upon humanity, had flung away his gains upon the green baize at Monte Carlo, and would do so again.

Ebbene!

CHAPTER IX

PERUZZI returned the plaques to the safe and stood up.

"It is quarter past five. At six-thirty, you will meet me in the lobby of the Savoy. In the meantime you shall have asked this American to dine with us, though I choke as I eat. But we cannot always select our tools. You do not hew out a David with a fountain pen, nor with an axe. Though I have never liked those hands of his; they would have been better on the forearms of the Farnese Hercules in Naples."

"You are no longer bored?"

"*Per Bacco!* I am alive for the first time in two years. Be off with you!"

Poggioli obeyed, but delightedly. He knew the futility of asking questions of this amazing

man. He hurried down the dark stairs, sniffing garlic, tomato sauce, and cheese as he went. There would be spaghetti in many a kettle this night; but he, Poggioli, would dine on tuna, roast beef, roast chicken, and dip his nose into a glass of rare old Chambertin. Peruzzi never went beyond Chianti or Chambertin and a liqueur with his coffee.

He hastened along the shadowy streets, grumbling for the cold. Well, in a little while he would have a new coat with a fur collar and spats and gloves that did not reek of benzine. The old game was toward.

He would dress at once and go to the Savoy, pick up his man and impress him with the honour he was conferring in bringing Sandro Peruzzi to dine with them. Ostensibly it would be his dinner party, but the Master would pay for it. What a man! Willing to throw away ten thousand a year, into the gutter, that he might feel himself free again.

A great artist, but by the whimsical mandates of the gods, unknown and unsung. What kind

of a man would he have been had the world enriched and applauded him? *Chi lo sa?*

Peruzzi leisurely put away his experimental emeralds, his tools, put out the furnaces, donned his fur-lined overcoat, set his derby rakishly upon his shapely head, then slowly descended the stairs to the street. Sometimes he wished that he could fit up a laboratory on a ground floor. But that was impossible for the curiosity of the police and carabinieri. They were always poking in where they were not wanted.

The city lights began to spring up. On the way to the tramway for Fiesole, as he was cutting across the Piazza Vittorio, he saw Giovanni Lucchesi coming in his direction. Lucchesi was one of his son-in-law's best friends; for Ellison had spent much of his youth in Florence. Peruzzi disliked Lucchesi because he knew instinctively that Lucchesi disliked him; and he knew why. Because he had disciplined Lisabetta sharply when in her rebel moods. And who had a better right than her father to perform

these offices, and to select a suitable husband for her? A man's daughter was his property to that extent.

When the two men came to the point where they were about to pass, Peruzzi stopped and raised his hat. Perforce Lucchesi had to do the same.

"Pardon me," began Peruzzi, amiably, "but seeing you this evening suggests a question."

"Your daughter Lisabetta is well, Signor . . . and happy."

"Thank you. That saves both of us from standing and fencing in the cold," replied Peruzzi. He bowed again and passed on.

Lucchesi chuckled; and later told his wife of the meeting.

"Ah!" said she. "He is beginning to miss her. He is growing lonely."

"My dear, he will never be lonely; he will always have Sandro Peruzzi for a companion. Still, it is an interesting event; and I believe I'll drop Ellison a line recording the fact."

"How did he look?"

"As debonair as ever. He seemed prosperous. But you never can tell by that. He was always dapperest when hardest pressed. But nowadays he has a small fortune to throw away. Bob was a fool to make the rogue an allowance."

"It will keep him out of mischief."

"I have my doubts. Bob was always something of a Quixote. He has the notion that Peruzzi can be actually tamed. That old tiger? Never. But Lisabetta is happy."

"Deliriously! Roberto is really Italian the way he makes love, and an American the way he continues to make it."

"Don't I continue?"

"Oh, you! You are different. But don't you think it a little hard that Peruzzi is not permitted to communicate with his daughter?"

"Bob knows what he is doing. But I'll write him. The old rogue may be contemplating a secret trip to America."

Which was precisely what the old rogue was doing.

The dinner at the Savoy was a success. Peruzzi knew this before coffee was served. The seller of typewriters was of the commercial type. There was nothing arresting about him, to set him forth, either toward the elegant or toward the inelegant; at the beginning he was neutral. He was a man of levels, being gradually lifted down as the champagne was lifted up. His first level was that of a suave man of the world; his second level was without suavity; his third level—several steps down in one stride—was that of smoke rooms, shady stories, loose talk about women, and the like; his fourth level was that of his bed, a ceremony which both Peruzzi and Poggioli attended.

"Poggioli, my friend, I leave him to your tender mercies."

"Trust me," replied Poggioli, grinning. "He is dead drunk; and I shall have plenty of time."

"The information must be absolute."

"It will be."

"The best of luck. There is no happy medium

with a guzzler; he empties his head or totally locks it up."

"He says he never drinks on board a ship going to New York, or while he is in New York."

"Meet me below at ten in the morning."

"Rest easy."

The next morning Peruzzi met his comrade in adventure at the appointed time and place.

"Master, I have him in the hollow of my hand," said Poggioli.

"Explain," said Peruzzi; and when the information was absorbed, he slapped Poggioli on the shoulder. "You're a jewel of a man. But I never underrated you; I merely underpaid you. That can be remedied. You have the making of a most finished rascal; but as the descendant of a cardinal, I absolve you. Is the fool awake?"

"No. You will tell him what you want done."

"Come; let us have it over with. Pah! But it's all for the cause, Poggioli."

Reffe, the American, was not in an amiable frame of mind. The only cure he knew for too much wine—*troppo vino*—was to be found in

sleep, and his new friends had aroused him in the middle of the curative. He returned to the bed and propped himself against the pillows.

"Since we put you to bed," began Peruzzi, "it is only right that we should pluck you out of it."

"Hang it all . . . !"

"Poggioli, tell the waiter to bring a pint of Cliquot."

"Oh, well," said Reffe, "I can stand a pick-up."

"What does he say?" asked Peruzzi, whose English was correct but not idiomatic. Poggioli, whose English included many American colloquialisms, translated. "Well, Mr. Roof——"

"Reffe," corrected the vinous one.

"Ah, yes! But perhaps I'd better wait for the wine."

When it came Reffe drank the pint. "Now, what's it all about?"

"Well, Mr. Reffe, I have a proposition to make to you."

"Another dinner? Nix. I'm leaving for Naples to-morrow. I sail Saturday."

"You were recently a customs inspector at the Port of New York?"

"Yes."

"You know all the . . ." Peruzzi hesitated.

"Ropes," supplied Poggioli.

"Yes," said Reffe. "What's the favour?"

Peruzzi explained in a low voice. Poggioli beamed. The old days would return presently.

"Nothing doing," said Reffe. "Not on your prehistoric tintype. I'm sober this morning."

"Supposing I offered you twenty-five hundred dollars?"

A droll notion popped into the head of Reffe. To lure this immaculate little duffer to New York, and then to leave him high and dry! A joke he could relate ten thousand times without losing a tittle of the zest!

"Make it five thousand, and the deal is closed."

"That is stiff."

"Take it or leave it. What you ask me to do is a prison offense, if I slip up."

"Very well; five thousand. On the word of Peruzzi."

Poggioli eyed his Master in astonishment. Five thousand, when he had the means to force Reffe to do the job for nothing? For he knew that Peruzzi would never break his promise.

"The deal is closed," said Reffe, solemnly. "But you'll have to go to New York with me."

"I expect to." But he knew that Reffe was concocting some drab kind of treachery. The man had surrendered too readily. "The name of the ship and the hour of sailing?"

"Can you get a passport inside of three days?" asked Reffe, wanting to laugh.

"I have one," answered Peruzzi.

Admiration glowed in Poggioli's eyes. Always prepared.

"Then I'll see you on the boat. Tell them downstairs not to wake me till five."

"With pleasure," replied Peruzzi. In the street once more, he turned to Poggioli. "How many did you say?"

"Thirty, all of two carats."

"Can you duplicate them in paste?"

"This afternoon. But why the five thousand?"

"Because he is a cheap rogue. In buying him I keep my level above him. Poggioli, what the devil is a prehistoric tintype?"

For once Poggioli could not answer.

"Well, bring the paste stones to the laboratory late this afternoon;" and Peruzzi went his way.

He began to laugh. Intermittently he laughed all the way back to the villa. Here it was again, the old thrilling risk, the daring chance, the gage of defiance to law. For in paying the man Reffe his five thousand, Sandro Peruzzi would not have enough money to pay his hotel bills in New York!

CHAPTER X

ROSA, the old servant, waited upon him at luncheon. She had been with the family for many years. She never replied to any of his orders but simply obeyed them. He spoke to her frequently to-day: little commentaries on life that had a humorous quirk.

"Lisabetta is well and happy, Rosa. Her father has done very well by her."

Rosa's eyes flashed as she removed the empty soup plate. Many times had she lent this daughter carfare when the father had refused it. She was continuing her duties because Lisabetta had wished it.

"Rosa, I be ieve I should return to the Church except that my knees have grown too brittle. That was always the trouble with the Peruzzi; it was very difficult to bend the knee."

Rosa began whipping the salad dressing. He

smiled. The sharpness of the clatter told him that Rosa was furious.

"And don't forget the paprika. You forgot it yesterday. If you would sprinkle a little on your thoughts, Rosa, you would be far more amusing."

She set the salad and dressing on the table. She dared not speak: the flood her stolidity held back might destroy her, if loosed. For she hated this man with all the sullen implacability of the Tuscan peasant: and worshipped his daughter unalterably.

"Rosa, it is winter; and yet I feel the pleasant pangs of spring in my veins. I know it to be a lie, like all emotions. Human beings! Heaven and hell! Rosa, when you enter the cathedral, do you ever pause to ask God's reason for putting us here?—only to live, suffer, and die? Beds of torture—birth and death. For what?"

Rosa crossed herself.

"That is the trouble with you, Rosa: you never ask for reasons. You make the sign of the cross."

Rosa went out for the coffee. A moment later Peruzzi heard the crash of a plate on the kitchen floor. He laughed. When she returned and placed the coffee pot beside his plate, she retired and would not be seen in the dining room till he had gone into his study. As a matter of fact, she was eager to get him gone from the house this day.

Peruzzi admired Rosa, but it would be folly to permit her to become aware of the fact. She had iron in her. He might as well thrust at a cuirass with a straw as to bombard her with ironies. But she knew his ways, and he was used to her. Lisabetta had never written to her, at any rate, not in care of the villa. The Lucchesi cook and Rosa were friends; perhaps Rosa got her letters there. Well, she would have nothing to report save that her master lived quietly and that Poggioli came no more to the villa.

After he had finished the coffee, he lit his half-cheroot and wandered into the living room, and through a window stared at the barren rose vines

upon the garden walls. In May again the stucco would be hidden under cascades of white and red and yellow roses and the air would carry the perfume into the house.

From the window he crossed over to the piano. It had been closed these two years. He sat down upon the stool, threw back the key lid and struck a chord. *Per Bacco!* The sound might have come from Rosa's domain—a debacle of pans! He dropped the lid, rose, and began to pace. Till recent years Lisabetta had played very well. Miss her? Of course he missed her: as he would have missed his coffee, his cheroot, or the equestrian of Vittorio in the piazza, happen they were taken away from taste and sight. The going of Lisabetta to America had broken a routine. At his age, bones did not grow together quickly nor readjustments as easily as before. It would seem that Poggioli had arrived at the psychological moment.

Suddenly he paused and gestured. His face expressed astonishment. What had put this thought into his head? He hadn't looked at

them for twenty years. He decided not to act upon the whim till after he heard Rosa clumping up to her garret room.

Perhaps the sight of them would enliven his diluted venom: this resurrection of his broken dreams. Dreams. He took his monocle from his eye and polished it thoughtfully. Was there an undiscovered weakness that he had not shored up with iron resolves? Why should he care to see these objects again, when the inspiration which had created them was dead and withered beyond recall? Perhaps there was back of the initial impulse another: mayhap there might be something amongst the rubble he could find use for in this new assault upon the credulity of human beings, particularly the savants. For, after all, that was the game: to make fools of wise men and then to mock them secretly.

By and by he heard Rosa clumping up the stairs. Then he proceeded to the cellar, lit a candle, and sought the corner where the old chest stood. Out of this chest he took many

bags, small bags of wool and chamois. There were between three and four hundred of these bags, and it required four trips to convey them to the study.

Next, he cleared the study table. In a little time the table was covered with silver and gold, malachite, lapis lazuli, carnelian, chrysoprase, beryl, turquoise, crystal: little gods and goddesses, rose trees in bloom, bas reliefs, portraits, all tenderly exquisite, indescribably beautiful.

Peruzzi sat down and stared at these objects through the smoke of a fresh cheroot. Chapters out of his youth. Rome; the pomp of the Vatican, the pomp of the Quirinal; a city filled with the rubble of magnificent dreams, to which the addition of his had been as a pinch of dust.

Suddenly the impulse came to him to sweep the beautiful toys to the floor, destroy them with his boot heels. He even rose with the gesture of assault; and slowly his arm fell. He could not do it: no more than he could strike Lisabetta in the old days when her placid stubbornness had roused his anger. The dream was

shattered; why hold on to it? Strange, he couldn't destroy these objects of his anger: because he could not destroy anything that was beautiful.

No; there was nothing he could use, nothing he would use, to lure a gull to the plucking. Moreover, they did not even excite his venom as he had hoped. Out of his own mind he had conceived them; by his own hands he had executed them. He was an artist; and he could not commit such a crime as to destroy these works of art. Lisabetta could have them when he died.

Apparently some smoke got into his eyes, and he wiped his monocle vigorously. It would seem that Sandro Peruzzi's experiences had not eliminated all the fool out of him.

As the winter dusk began to creep down the valley from the east, Peruzzi left the villa to meet Poggioli at the laboratory. He would dine in town. Three meals with Rosa would be fatal.

As his tram, twinkling with lights, screeched on its downward flight, two men stepped out of

the embrasure of the gate opposite to the Peruzzi villa. They raced across the street to the Peruzzi bell, which one of them rang peculiarly. Almost at once the hall light in the villa replied. Shortly the gate swung open, being controlled from the house; but those entering or leaving had to close the gate. The strangers proceeded to the door which was opened by the woman Rosa.

"He dines here?" asked one of the men.

"No, Signor; in the city." Rosa smiled. "You will have all the time you need. Follow me."

Rosa led the two men to the cellar and directed them to the chest.

"But it weighs!" cried one of the men, after trying to lift one end of the chest.

"I see plenty of baskets," said the other. "We'll use them to transport the stuff to the automobile. But this lock?"

"It is never locked," said Rosa. "He hasn't touched the chest in years, Signor."

"But gold and silver!"

Rosa shrugged. "It is his way."

"Maybe he has sold the gold and silver."

"Let's get to work. We have much to do. And be very careful not to break anything. There's a real fortune here, if my information is correct."

"We'll have our hands full, getting it out of the city."

"Not out of Florence; but elsewhere, yes."

"And if we're caught, my friend!"

"We shall not be. My plan is perfect."

It was past six o'clock when the two men were about to make their final journey to the automobile. One of them turned to Rosa.

"Here is the sum agreed upon." He tried to press into Rosa's hands a packet of notes. With a repugnant gesture, she declined them.

"No. I am satisfied. What has been done will some day twist his heart. When we grow old and weak, we go back to the things of our youth; and he shall not find these."

"Better take the notes."

"I am paid."

"*Ebbene!*"

After the men were gone, Rosa went into the dining room and stood with her brown fat arms akimbo against her hips, and stared at her master's chair.

"So! You laugh, eh? You make fun of God and the Virgin? You laugh when people are hurt in the heart, eh? *Ladro!* But you shall see. *Pazienza!* God grant that I live long enough to see the hot tears in *your* eyes—tears like Lisabetta, who wanted to love you!"

Peruzzi sought his table in his favourite restaurant in the Via Tornabuoni. He was now in capital spirits.

"Guilio, this lobster from Livorno, is it fresh?"

"*Si, Signor.*"

"Bring it, then. My white Chianti. Guilio, what do you think of Benvenuto Cellini?"

"Ah, Signor, he was one of the greatest artists that ever lived," declared the waiter. What other answer could be expected of a Florentine?

Peruzzi laughed sardonically. "Yes, Cellini

was great. But supposing he hadn't had popes for his patrons: would Francis I have heard of him?—would the world?"

Guilio smiled and shrugged. Too often had this immaculate little man led him into verbal traps; so he had grown wary.

"Guilio, this Cellini was a windbag, a braggart. He writes that he was a great soldier. But who can prove it? I . . . I never brag. And bring me an artichoke. Moreover, Cellini was unethical: he advertised. My son-in-law could tell you all about *him*. He writes authoritatively on Benvenuto."

Peruzzi laughed. It was a joyous world . . . if one wasn't alone too much.

CHAPTER XI

THE library of Robert Ellison completely illustrated the word: it was a library. Towering shelves covered three sides of the room; there were lounges and easy chairs and reading lamps; there were tobacco humidors and little collections of pipes and scattered ash trays; and a white sandstone fireplace so large and beautiful that it might easily have come out of Chambord. A lofty room, which appeared loftier than it was because the fire and the gray-shaded lamps dimmed the oak ceiling.

Above the mantel of the fireplace hung a piece of old Flemish tapestry. Against the centre of this, unframed, was a painting of Ellison's father, done by Chartran when he and Ellison, senior, had had studios in the same loft in Florence. Ellison, senior, would have been a great portrait painter but for one thing: *his*

father had left him several millions: the fire had been in his brush but the spur had not rowelled his ambition sufficiently. There were no other paintings in the library.

There is always one room in a house that we love, and we are forever getting into it, upon one excuse or another. Ellison and his wife loved the library, particularly the hour before dinner and the hour before bedtime.

To-night Ellison and his wife sat on a lounge near the fireplace, where two fresh logs were crackling pleasantly. Early December weather was outside; a bit of snow, and a shrewish wind. Ellison was under the lamp, reading the evening paper. Lisabetta sat in the shadowy corner knitting something in white, which she held near the basket, in a kind of low visibility; for no woman knows how a husband will take news of a certain character. From time to time her eyes turned from her ivory needles to the handsome profile of her husband. They were both in evening dress. Suddenly Ellison threw aside the newspaper.

"Hello, wife!"

"Hello, husband!"

He loved to hear her say "husband." Her English was always correct and charmingly spoken, but there were some words over which her Italian tongue would falter, strive against it how she might.

"Betta, you are beautiful."

"You still think that, after two years?"

He laughed. "You grow more beautiful every day."

"For that, if you like, you may kiss me.'

"Not afraid of being mussed up?"

She set her work basket on the floor and sidled over to his end of the lounge. She caught his head between her palms and kissed his eyes, the tip of his nose, then his lips.

"Betta, sometimes I grow afraid. No man has the right to be as happy as I am."

"It is I who should be afraid." She took one of her husband's hands and pressed it fiercely against her heart. "I had been so unhappy! So long as my father lived I knew that I should

be unhappy. . . . And then you came. Yet, now that I am so happy . . . " She paused.

"Well?"

"Bobby, I often think of my father. I see him now in the distance; I see him better. Supposing something happened to him that we know nothing about?"

"Whenever I think of him, I think of the shabby shoes he made you wear, of the shabby clothes. He might have known that he could not bend you."

Betta smiled. "But he did. I married a rich man who pays my father ten thousand a year to be . . . honest."

"Oh, that was different."

"Not to Lisabetta Peruzzi's father."

"Well, so long as he keeps quiet, I don't mind."

"But will he keep quiet? I know that brain of his. It is like one of those Alpine streams that run and hide themselves. Somewhere in the dark it bubbles and churns. I was not his

daughter so much as I was one of the human race he so despised. Bobby, he is really a great genius; but he would not hate humanity simply because it ignored his gifts. There is something else. And human beings are unjust. Be honest with me. What would you have given for that plaque if he had told you it was his creation?"

"Maybe five hundred," Ellison confessed readily, but without any shame.

"You see? But because you believed Cellini had made it, you were willing to pay thirty thousand. You collectors! You must have your rose painted or sculptured. When you say that Botticelli or Del Sarto or Rafaele is greater than any living artist—that Cellini did finer work than my father can do—I say no. It is that you have a blind spot; it is that you have acquired this blind spot from precedence; it is that your vanity rules your judgment. I do not defend my father's acts; I do but defend his genius. Ah! Could you but see the things he leaves in the cellar. What did Cellini . . . "

"Heart o' mine, the plaque is extraordinary.

But here is the point you miss. When I buy an old master, I buy history, the beginning of art in its true expressions, the sun from which radiate the little suns. If I were a bibliomaniac, I should move heaven and earth for the first printed Bible, the first Shakespearian portfolio: as for years I have moved heaven and earth for a genuine Cellini."

"There is Rodin."

"Rodin had to be discovered. Perhaps your father's intolerant outlook—temper—would not permit him to be discovered. I wouldn't take thrice thirty thousand for that plaque, bogus as it is. Yes, I too have often thought of your father. Which recalls that I received a letter from Lucchesi to-day."

"Giovanni? How is Rita, his wife? Are they coming to America?" Betta asked eagerly.

"No. He merely writes that your father stopped him on the street recently and asked the state of your health. He's human; he couldn't quite forget you. Lord, who could?"

Betta did not reply, but turned and stared into

the fire. Her father. She could not remember her mother. He had never struck her, but often she had wished he would: so much kinder would have been the rod than the spattering hot lead of his irony. And yet she felt a great sorrow for him—over there in his loneliness, self-imposed.

"The sedan is at the door, sir," the butler came in to announce.

The Ellisons were going to a dinner-dance. They were much in demand socially. Ellison had drifted away from the social world; but after his marriage he had found his way back easily enough. His amusement and happiness lay in watching Lisabetta enjoy herself. How she loved to dance! The young bloods were crazy about her; but she, while dancing with them, was always looking over their shoulders toward himself, seated or dancing. The fire of her glance and the warmth of her smile always made him cease to regret his comforting reading lamps.

Her beauty was now enhanced by her natural wit and charm, no longer concealed by fear—fear of some new devilment of her father's. These little sallies into the world of pleasure, like that of to-night, perfected her. She had that rare gift of speaking with her eyes when she might not speak with her lips; but she used this gift for him alone. It amused and gratified him to find that it was Lisabetta his world wanted; he could come along, too, if he cared.

Two things, however, she would not do, and he never urged her: she would not wear jewels or play cards. She had very good reasons. But as he liked a game of bridge, she ordered him to his club on Saturday nights.

These thoughts, ever recurring, were his again to-night as the sedan rolled silently along the Avenue, past the Park: just as her hand was always reaching out for his in the dark. To tame the amusing old rogue for her peace of mind's sake. For he knew that under her gayety was the abiding thought: What would Sandro

Peruzzi do next? She was insistent that a mind like her father's would not be satisfied with the mere rehabilitation of his finances. Yet so far Peruzzi had held to the contract. Poggioli was never recorded as visiting the villa these days.

Poggioli!

"What is it?" asked Lisabetta.

"What is what?"

"You hurt my hand, you pressed it so."

"I was thinking of you when I first saw you, in the leghorn hat, watching the fishermen in the Arno." He knew that he must not hesitate before a mind as keen as hers.

"Don't you like this hat I have on?"

"Of course I do; but there's nothing romantic about it."

"I can't wear a leghorn in December."

He laughed and kissed her hand. As she did not speak again, he returned to Poggioli. He would know; but could he be bribed to tell? Was he loyal to Peruzzi, or was it greed? Lucchesi could be depended to dig up the aye or nay

of that. What to do with this information, if he got it, was something for the future. Lisabetta's happiness; that was the main thing, even if it cost a million.

At the dinner Lisabetta was paired with a handsome middle-aged man by the name of Joseph Norton.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself," he said—"dancing at my age! I should be saying my prayers."

Lisabetta laughed "What would you pray for—better and shorter music?"

"That's so!" he exclaimed, irrelevantly. "I had forgotten. You are Italian. That delightful accent——"

"My home was in Florence."

"Delectable city! It seems to me the one city left wherein we may visualize its ancient citizens without the aid of guidebooks. Five years ago I rented a villa on the Mugnone. I never saw so many roses as I saw that spring. I wonder if I might name a few of my Florentine

friends to see if you know them, if they are well and prosperous?"

"Oh, yes; please!"

"Do you happen to know if Sandro Peruzzi still lives? He was one of the most charming and amiable men I ever knew."

CHAPTER XII

ALL sounds went away from Lisabetta's ears, and her body felt as if someone had opened a window behind her. She *knew!* She knew it instantly, as definitely as though he had declared the fact, that this pleasant stranger had bought a Cellini plaque. She had never expected a dénouement of this character, never thought to meet face to face one of her father's victims. What had been and was her fear was this, that her father's restless mind would incite him to defy the law too sharply and that the law would take him into court and deluge him with international publicity. For herself she did not care: it was the thought that the man she loved so ardently would be shamed among his friends.

The phenomenon which arose out of this dramatic moment was that her mind promptly

cleared itself of the effect of the blow. So long a time had her mind been painfully alert, so often in the old days had she trembled at the sound of the villa bell, that her mental control was almost perfect. Danger; an abyss had opened at her feet; and she must walk around it with a smile.

One grew used to a notion, whether it was trimmed with terror or with pleasure. Had she been alone—unmarried—she would have met this blow with philosophical urbanity. But she wasn't alone. Almost directly across from the table was the man she loved, a keenly observant man whose pleasure it was to watch her continuously. He had the Latin eye for detecting emotion. She would be able to command voice and gesture, but her eyes might impart to him something of her terror. She was afraid to look at him, afraid not to.

"Sandro Peruzzi is my father," she said to Norton, smiling.

"What? You are the daughter of Sandro Peruzzi? Well, well! I am astounded!"

"Why?"

"I dined at the villa several times. I never saw you."

"Perhaps I was in the country. Surely he mentioned me?"

"But in a manner to give me the impression that you were a child!" Norton laughed.

"That would be my father. Even to this day he refuses to accept me as grown up. How small this world is!"

She had probably been in the house. Whenever her father had entertained men, she had always refused to come down, often going without her dinner. She never would have had the courage to discover his fraudulent enterprises; but her resolution never to lend her presence to any of them had never been broken. . . . Not because he had been proud of her beauty, but for the insidious lure of it!

"You are right," said Norton; "the world is small. I had pictured you as a child of six or seven."

Lisabetta laughed; but the laughter came from her throat.

"He is well?"

"He will be the same dapper man he is now when I am an old woman."

Reaction. Perhaps her alarm was groundless. Her instinct had leapt toward the supposition as a bullet to the target. Her father might have entertained this man innocently. But against this possibility was her father's contempt for the Americans he had met, socially and speculatively: Americans who went about Europe digging pits for themselves with fatuous confidence in their native shrewdness. Nothing pleased her father so much as to rook those whose conceit was impregnable to the laws of ordinary caution. Later she would find out from Bobby who this man Norton was, what he did.

By now she was no longer afraid of her eyes; so she turned them upon her husband.

"I love you!" they said.

"I love you!" said his.

"Your husband is quite an authority on Cellini," Norton remarked.

"I beg your pardon!" said Lisabetta. "What did you say?"

Norton repeated.

"Ah! When I look at my husband, my ears shut themselves to sounds."

"I imagine his do, too; for I never look at him that I do not find him looking at you. But then, how can he help it?" Norton sighed. "How many dances are you going to give me?"

"I'm sorry, but I shall not dance to-night."

"What? There will be a riot."

"But I shall sit them out—two or three. You Americans are mad for wanting to stay up all night."

Later she got her husband aside.

"Who is this Mr. Norton I went in to dinner with?"

"Wall Street banker. He has one of the finest private collections of jade in America. I know him only casually. Bachelor."

"I wonder if we could see the collection some day?"

"That will be easy. I'll suggest it to him later. I'd like to see the jade myself."

Lisabetta sat out her dance with Norton.

"My husband tells me," she said, "that you have a wonderful collection of Chinese jade."

"I shall be happy to show it to you both, if you'll set the afternoon."

"We shall be delighted."

How to put the question that bubbled for expression? She could not ask the man if he had a plaque. Nor could she ask him if he had seen it. But one thing was certain, she must know definitely, one way or the other, before she left this house.

"My father is very fond of green things."

"And about the wittiest man I ever met. No button on his foil, thank you. And yet so amiable when he pinned his victim to the wall!"

"I hope he never pinned you."

"I found a great deal of amusement in his company."

"He is not a man who makes friends easily."

'Will he be visiting you, I wonder?"

"He dislikes the sea."

"Well, if ever he does visit these shores, let me know. I should be happy to renew the acquaintance."

Which to Lisabetta's mind might have signified one of a dozen reasons why Norton wished to renew the acquaintance. He might honestly have liked her father; he might have bought a Cellini plaque; he might even have learned that it was spurious. He was a personable man of the world, and he would not be likely to tell her that Sandro Peruzzi had rooked him.

"He does not like Americans as a rule," she said.

"If he had not spoken of you as a child," he said, "I should have demanded a presentation."

This settled her doubt in regard to one question: if he had been rooked, he had not yet discovered the fact.

"What makes it so astonishing to me," Norton went on, "is the fact that he is something of a madman where beauty is concerned."

"Thank you. Indirect, but always acceptable." Lisabetta laughed. "He was very fond of his copies."

"I suppose I ought to tell you."

"About what?" But she felt her heart shake.

"That Cellini plaque of his. He showed it to me one night. I'm afraid I lost my head; for I offered to buy it then and there. But he laughed and declared that it wasn't for sale."

"Oh, that!" said Lisabetta. "He thought more of that than he did of me."

"What would you say if you learned that the plaque was no longer your rival?"

"I have a husband whom I love, so nothing else matters," she answered, gayly.

"And here he comes, the lucky dog!" As Ellison approached, Norton rose. "You and Mrs. Ellison are coming some afternoon to see my jade collection."

"We shall enjoy that," replied Ellison.

"How about Thursday afternoon of this week?"

Ellison looked at his wife inquiringly.

"We have nothing for that afternoon," she said.

"Thursday afternoon, then," said Ellison. "My dance, Betta."

But when they reached the ballroom, she told him she was not dancing to-night. "My head aches. Bobby *mio,* can't we steal away? I'd like to spend the rest of the evening alone with you."

"Nothing could please me better."

Lisabetta decided to say nothing of her talk with Norton. It would only worry Bobby uselessly. She did not believe that Norton would exhibit the plaque on Thursday. How much had he paid for it? Possibly as much as Bobby had. Oh, her father was infernally clever! What had he done with all that money? Thrown it across the card tables at Monte Carlo, while she had walked in cracked shoes and worn, made-over gowns. But was not that well? None of the evil gains had touched her; she was untainted. She wondered if, even on his death-bed, she could forgive him the shameful miseries

of those days? How had he treated her mother? She did not know. It was even possible that he had not loved her but had married her for the prestige of her family name, an ancient Roman one. Debonair, mocking, conscienceless that he now was, had there not been glorious dreams in youth? The marvellous beauty of those discarded miniatures in the villa cellar! No man without sublime music in his soul could have conceived and sculptured them. What had destroyed his soul? What kind of disillusion had withered him?

As the sedan rolled up to the Ellison home, a taxi wheeled away, smartly; but neither Lisabetta nor Ellison, made unobservant by thought, noted the taxi.

The occupant leaned toward the sliding window forward. "You are certain that is the Ellison home?"

"I don't know who lives there. It is the street and number you asked for."

"*Fermate!*"

"Whazat?" asked the chauffeur.

"Stop—halt! An automobile is stopping in front of the house. . . . So! . . . A man and a woman are entering the house. Return and question the chauffeur."

"Yes, sir." But the hired chauffeur grumbled silently. Old three-eyes was wearing out the brakes with his conflicting orders. Still, there'd be about a dollar in tips.

He caught the sedan at the end of the street, leaned out and shouted his query. He was informed that that was the Ellison home.

"That was the house, sir," he told his fare.

"*Per Bacco!*"

"Tobacco? Will a Camel do?"

"No, no! Return to the hotel."

Which the chauffeur joyfully proceeded to do. There, his passenger carefully studied the meter, grimly counted out the exact fare and a tip of seventy-nine cents. Then he wheeled briskly and entered the towering hostelry which made the Palazza Strozzi look like a boarding house or pension.

"Hey, Bill!" the chauffeur called to another. "Did you pipe the guy with the vintage plug and the bay-window in his eye?"

"Ye-ah. We have no bananas."

"Well, that was the King of Italy."

"What did he tip you?"

"Seventy-nine cents."

"I know where you can get two collars laundered for nine cents. So that was the king, eh?"

"Incog."

"Running away from Mussolini?"

"Looks like it; he had a white shirt on."

While Sandro Peruzzi, who would have relished this sidewalk banter, entered the hotel lobby and looked about for the man Reffe.

CHAPTER XIII

PERUZZI had arrived that morning, after a stormy passage along one sea and across another. During the voyage the man Reffe had been his constant companion, at meals, on deck, in the smoke room. Reffe was easily stirred to laughter, often over positively humourless things; and his guffaws stung Peruzzi's eardrums, for he hated noises of any kind. Still, Reffe gave him valuable information about the port, saw to it that his luggage had visitation labels, engineered him through the passport and immigration business, and finally deposited him under the letter P in the shed.

"I'm over at R," said Reffe. "They know me; and I'll be with you in a jiffy."

Peruzzi had three pieces of luggage: a steamer trunk, a suitcase, and a valise known as an English kitbag. The examination of the three

agreed perfectly with the declaration papers, and Peruzzi was given to understand that he was free to depart.

He and Reffe, with their luggage, got into a taxi-cab and were driven across the town to that Alp of brick, that transient warren of thousands of human rabbits, which was to be Peruzzi's habitation for the present. The genial Reffe convoyed him to the room-desk, secured a room after some difficulty, and assured Peruzzi that he would find every convenience. Peruzzi offered no suggestions; for the present he was in Reffe's hands.

"Now I'll leave you," said the genial Reffe. "I'll return at eleven to-night, and then we'll talk it over."

"At eleven to-night," replied Peruzzi, gravely. He wasn't sure that Reffe would return on the hour, but was absolutely sure that the fool would eventually return: he had to.

Peruzzi followed the bellboy to the lift, keeping his eye more particularly upon the heavy kitbag. Arriving at the sixteenth floor—near the roof of

this amazing *campanile*—he was conducted to an immaculate room with bath. He gave the boy a quarter. This was his first visit to America; but London, Paris, and Rome had thoroughly instructed him in the manners and usages of hotels and their attendants. He was no longer to be awed or nonplussed.

The vista from the window was imposing but was scarcely to be called beautiful: roofs, miles of them, patched with snow and steam, a patched sky above, a river patched with scurrying ferries. Tin roofs instead of ruddy tile—ugly. A skyline resembling an old saw. From the sea it had taken upon itself the insubstantiality of a fairy picture; and now he saw it without illusion.

The notion of being in a *campanile*—belfry—made him smile. Bells; from the lifts, from the rooms about, from the telephones.

He investigated the room, and much to his delight he found a clothespress which could be locked. Into this he thrust the kitbag, locked the door and dropped the key into his pocket. Then he undressed, refreshed himself with a hot

bath, and got into bed. He would do his thinking later.

He slept from ten till three, then dressed and went down into the street, having decided to stroll about, to accustom himself to the bewildering noises and movements of this breathless city. He paused to watch the traffic at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street. Never before had he seen so many automobiles. The richest city in the world. He would see the Metropolitan Museum, the Morgan collection, and the Metropolitan Opera House. He nodded approvingly as he saw the dimensions of the Public Library. He did not think the lions suitable, however; bears, bisons, or even cows would have been in better taste. Still, the pile had astonishing dignity.

An omnibus drew up to the curb. Peruzzi decided to take a ride. Where this omnibus would carry him he neither knew nor cared. He had the name of his hotel, and had no worry about finding his way back. Besides, there was an unending stream of omnibuses coming down

from the north. He took a seat on top, and his interest warmed, though the winter wind bit his toes after awhile.

Lisabetta. Perhaps she had ridden by in one of those splendid automobiles; perhaps she was in one of the shops; perhaps she was on the sidewalk. Millions. Yes, he had done very well there: Lisabetta was rich and happy. He laughed. While he himself was neither rich nor happy, and in a few days would be wondering where his next meal was to be found. He was in the hands of the god of chance-medley. To lift the cup blindfolded—nectar or poison, as the god willed. It would be amusing.

At five o'clock he returned to the hotel, hungry. Nevertheless, he was determined to touch food not before seven. For years he had been frugal at the table; now he would be a little more frugal.

So he set himself to the affair which had brought him all these miles, with the end as uncertain as the wind. But the sense of freedom was his. If worst came to worst, he could cable

Poggioli to sell those trinkets in the cellar and remit the money. Passage home. Out of the telephone book he got his son-in-law's address and wrote it down. To-night sometime he would hire an automobile and drive up to the house, so that he would remember it. To have done this in the daylight would have been attended by risk. When he appeared to his son-in-law, he wanted the moment surprising and dramatic.

He had no intention of disturbing his daughter's happiness. No. She would have her luxuries and her husband no matter what her father did. To cast ten thousand a year at his son-in-law's feet and to return to the old alluring excitements. Life was a jest; he purposed to play it so. He had never rooked an honest man. The men—all of them—to whom he had sold a Cellini plaque had had speckled consciences; even Ellison, his son-in-law, had not been immune.

Still, over and above it, he had sold each a thing of singular beauty; it was a genuine Peruzzi. He laughed softly. He had struck at

those who would have refused to recognize the genius of Peruzzi, but who were ready to acquire, at enormous prices, honestly if they could, otherwise if they could not, a Cellini! Why shouldn't he mock them?

He should never have brought along that emerald necklace. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances. The day might come when he might be in need of bread and butter. Then he would take the necklace to some pawnbroker and pledge it. Rook the rooker. Where was the pawnbroker who did not rook the needy and the pitiful? And where was the pawnbroker who would be expert enough to note the difference between the Peruzzi emeralds and the genuine? True, he could sell the formula on a royalty basis. But that kind of wealth? No. He was an artist.

He looked forward to a thin purse because he was determined to pay this man Reffe the five thousand promised. It would be easy enough to force Reffe to do the work for nothing; but Sandro Peruzzi was not that kind of an enemy

to society. Besides, being moneyless in New York would excite his ingenuity.

Promptly at eleven o'clock that night Reffe knocked and was bidden to enter, which he did, grinning.

"Well, what do you think of the burg?"

"Burg?"

"New York. You understand English."

"Some of it," said Peruzzi, drily. "Let us get to the business under hand."

Reffe laughed, lit a long black cigar, and sat down. Peruzzi broke in two one of his remaining cheroots, twisted it into his holder, and a moment later was blowing forth the bitter smoke, serenely.

"The game is off," said Reffe, abruptly.

"You refuse to go through with it, then?"

"Sure! What kind of a boob do you think I am? You haven't got anything on me. You can't arrest a man on a rumour. Your friend Poggioli got me drunk. Sure. I even dropped a bit about smuggling, just to draw him on.

And here you are, all dressed up and no place to go!" Reffe laughed heartily. "I brought you to America to tell you I couldn't do the job. Now, all you've got to do is to toddle back to that dear Florence." Reffe laughed again.

"In other words, to make a fool of me."

"The very thing."

"Two souls with but a single thought, as the poet said. That's precisely why I made the trip with you—to make a fool of you." Peruzzi smiled. "I offered you five thousand."

"And you weren't going to pay it? O. K. with me. What you want me to do is a prison job, if I fall down on it. Nothing doing."

"My man Poggioli is very clever. He put you to bed tenderly the first night. He was two hours alone in your room."

"Well, what of it?"—truculently.

Peruzzi laughed softly. "Never underrate any one. One's brain does not let down then. Your business is very ingenious, but too well you like a joke. I like jokes, too, but temperately. To go abroad three or four times a year to sell

typewriters ostensibly—correct me if I do not use the right word—when in fact your business is smuggling precious stones, is worthy of an artist. And you bungle. Everything open for you. Friends—old friends—among the customs officials. Yet your stupidity amazes me."

"It does, huh? All you got to do is to denounce me as a smuggler and see where you get off."

"No doubt you have looked into the cylinder of your typewriter since you left the ship?"

Reffe lowered his cigar, but did not speak.

"I suppose you believe it advisable to keep quiet for a few days. Very well. When you turn over those thirty-two-carat stones, you will be astonished to learn that they are paste."

Reffe jumped to his feet, his throat and forehead corrugated with veins.

"*Pazienza!*" warned the dapper little man. "Violence will not serve. You are known to be in this room with me. It will not help you in the least to manhandle me. How much better it will be if you serve me and receive both your

diamonds and five thousand. On the hour you bring me what I wish, you will be doubly paid. You wonder why we suspected the typewriter? Well, then, why carry it back and forth across the sea, when it would have been so simple to store it in Naples or Genoa? We thought at first it might be the key tops, but those were too shallow. The rubber cylinder; very clever. When you were in wine you spoke of Settipassi, the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio. You bought there ten brilliants, so my man found."

Reffe had his share of common sense. He saw that he had been beaten at the start, and that violence would only deepen the bog he was in. Three times, during the voyage, he had poured out the stones, but without examining them! Paste! A little wine . . . damn fool that he was!

Peruzzi stood up, watch in hand. "I give you five minutes to decide. If at the end of that time you are not amenable to reason, I shall summon the office. If you play my game, what I know becomes buried ten thousand fathoms

deep. I am not a moralist or a reformer. Your business is your own, except when I need it. I shall add further information. Robert Ellison is my son-in-law, and I can promise you that he will bring no case against you."

"Son-in-law? Why the hell didn't you put it that way at the start?"

"Because I too like a joke."

"And you will pay me five thousand for the job?"

"Yes."

"Why?" This intrigued Reffe. Why should this surprising little devil of a man pay George Reffe for something the fortunes of war could force him to do for nothing?

"Because," said Peruzzi, putting his watch in his pocket, "I'm a fool too; for I never break a promise."

"You win," said Reffe.

CHAPTER XIV

SO LONG had Lisabetta been accustomed to smothering her emotions, of seizing her alarms the moment they stepped out of the subconscious, that Ellison saw nothing amiss. Yet her nerves had grown so excitable that the clatter of a spoon was like a blow. She could not tell her husband that Norton had a plaque, though instinct urged her. It would destroy his peace of mind, and the destruction of her own was enough. She had promised Norton that she and Bobby would have tea with him Thursday afternoon to view the jade collection; and she dared not go for the fear that Norton would get her aside and show her the Cellini plaque. She was afraid of herself: afraid that if she did see the plaque, she would let down and tell the man the truth.

It was Thursday morning.

"Bobby, I don't feel up to going out this afternoon. Will you telephone Mr. Norton to postpone the tea?"

"He may be having a little formal affair on our account. If that's the case, we'll have to go. I'll telephone from the office. We can ask him over to dinner some night. He's a fine chap, but with rather a gay record."

"I found him charming," said Lisabetta.

"He is; but I shouldn't care to have you seen alone with him about town. Oh, he would treat you with absolute respect; he will always treat you that way; but if he were seen alone with you, rumour would begin to bell it about. A past in New York is pretty hard to live down. I'm lenient toward him because he is a bachelor."

"You wouldn't trust me alone with him?"

Ellison laughed. "I'd trust you anywhere in this world, with the devil on one side and Louis XV on the other. But you can't shake a rumour any more than you can shake your shadow. Understand, I like Norton, though I don't know him very well."

"Bobby, are you sure that your reports about Father are correct?"

"Tolerably correct."

"But inaction, to a mind as electrical as his!"

"He is close to sixty, honey; and I fancy the machinery is a bit run down. Besides, looking at you, hearing your voice, I'm in a mood to forgive him of murder. Honey, I've been wondering: do you remember your mother at all?"

"No. I've never confessed it before, but Father did not keep a single photograph of her about the villa. She died when I was about three, just after we came to Florence. I was born in Rome, I believe."

"Were they happy?"

"No. He was probably as cruel to her as he was to me. Oh, never a blow or a high word. When you cross a rug on a cold day like this and touch a light-button, it snaps and stings. That was and is my father. He did not hate me because I was his daughter; he hated me because I was alive, a human being. Knowing him as I do, I can't believe that your generosity has tamed him.

He is vigorous and healthy, for all his age. In two years the novelty of the exploit which brought us together will have died away."

"All we can do is to sit tight. I'll telephone Norton. But if he has asked others to tea, we'll have to go."

Money. Of what use were his millions if they could not give perfect happiness to the woman he loved, dispel these recurring fears of hers effectually? For years he had not spent his income. The money had kept piling up; it would go on piling up. What he had in mind, what he had set in action, would require the expenditure of a considerable fortune; but if out of it there came a happy ending, the fortune would have been wisely spent. To make Lisabetta happy; and at the same time—yes—conquer the rebel who was her father.

He frankly admired the man, as much for his ironic deviltry as for his genius. Never did he picture himself and the others, who had bought Cellini plaques, that he did not chuckle. He was certain that he would have chuckled just as

honestly if Lisabetta had not come to him along with the plaque. A sardonic humorist, who might still have a white corner in his rebel soul.

The butler entered the breakfast room.

"Two gentlemen in the hall, sir, to see you."

"What about?"

"I don't know, sir. Business of some sort. I told them that you would be at your office at ten-thirty. But one of them brusquely told me that he would not leave the house till he saw you, sir."

"Very well," said Ellison.

Lisabetta followed her husband into the hall.

"Mr. Robert Ellison?" asked one of the strangers.

"Yes."

"Information has come to the Customs that about two years ago you entered the Port of New York with a plaque of chrysoprase alleged to have been made by Benvenuto Cellini."

Lisabetta's hand went to her throat.

"In examining your declaration at that time, the Federal Government finds that you omitted

to declare this plaque," went on the stranger. "We have further information that this plaque reposes at present in your box at the bank. My orders are to accompany you to the bank for this Cellini plaque and such documents as go with it and to convey the same to the Appraiser's office."

Her father was here in New York. Lisabetta *knew* it.

Ellison's thought, however, did not reach so far. But at the same time he knew exactly what had happened. His father-in-law had betrayed him; that was clear. But what was not clear was the motive. There wasn't a shrewder mind in the world than Peruzzi's; and yet this stroke was apparently colossal folly. The publicity! Why, if this got into the newspapers, the other dupes would appear, and the hoax would be given international flavour. The Italian Government would not be slow to move, and a heavy hand would fall on Peruzzi's shoulder. Ellison could not understand; there was no handhold to the situation; it was positively incomprehensi-

ble. How should he act? By what means could he fend off the newspapers? Supposing he had declared the plaque in the beginning? The situation would have been the same—Peruzzi's disclosure to the world. Poggioli? No. Poggioli was only greedy, not vengeful. This was Peruzzi's bomb. Some new devilment. But did the scalawag realize that he was risking his liberty and ten thousand a year as well?

He felt Lisabetta's hand on his arm. Poor girl! He wouldn't have to explain anything to her; already she would be understanding everything. And here was his marvellous plan, gone to pot, after he had set it into action! The infernal old rogue!

"From whence came this information?" he demanded.

"I am not at liberty to tell you, sir."

But Lisabetta knew; and as she stood beside the man she loved, it came to her that she must almost immediately go through a dreadful ordeal to keep shame out of this house.

CHAPTER XV

"YOUR credentials," said Ellison to the spokesman of the two officials from the Customs.

The credentials were exhibited. There was nothing for Ellison to do but to go with them to the bank and surrender the plaque.

"Don't worry," he said to Lisabetta. "It'll come out all right. I'll be back at three. I'll telephone."

"What is he trying to do?" whispered Lisabetta.

Ellison understood that she referred to her father, Sandro Peruzzi. "I am going to find out."

He kissed her, got his hat and coat, and followed the Customs men to the car—his own.

"How long has this information been in your possession?"

"Since yesterday. If the plaque proves to

be antique and educational, there won't be any trouble. If it isn't antique, you will be subjected to a fine."

"The reason I didn't declare it is because it isn't antique, and I did not want the public to know that I had been fooled. Now I am going to tell you who gave you the information. It was Sandro Peruzzi. I can't understand why because he happens to be my father-in-law."

"Your father-in-law? Holy smoke, that's a queer one!"

"I don't understand it."

"Well, your record at the Appraiser's is high; so I don't think you'll have any trouble."

"I want to keep it out of the newspapers."

"The best way to do that is not to accompany me to the Appraiser's. You're known; and if you show up with me, it's likely to get about."

"I suppose that's the best way."

The rest of the journey downtown was made in silence and tobacco smoke. At the bank the three of them went down into the vault, where Ellison turned over the plaque and the document

purported to have been written by an ancestor of Peruzzi's—a captain in the Vatican Guards at the time of Clement VII. In exchange for this he was given an Appraiser's receipt which, after a casual glance, he stuffed in a pocket.

"How long before you will release it?" he asked.

"Just as soon as its status has been decided. It may be ten days."

"Better get the curator of the Museum. He'll know whether the plaque is genuine or not."

"Thanks. Sorry to bother you, Mr. Ellison; but you know the game. Always something like this turning up."

Ellison proceeded to his office, where he handled the estate. He found a long cable on his desk. He read this with a high degree of pleasure. Poggioli had been bought! At once he crossed the corridor to the offices of his attorneys. He was closeted with his chief adviser for an hour. At the end of this conference, he referred to his present predicament.

"You're embarking upon a wild adventure," said the attorney.

"What the devil would you do in my place?"

"With your money, possibly the same thing. But if I saw a hornets' nest, I wouldn't poke it with a stick." The attorney smiled. "I'll send Morrison to England to-morrow. I believe that side can be ironed out easily. Morrison is a diplomat."

"And I'll handle the American end. But I want everything done with speed."

"I'm afraid it will go rather slowly in England. The Britisher likes his tea. But I can promise that there will be all the speed the traffic will stand."

Ellison returned to his own office and sat down at his desk, free for a moment. Under the circumstances—the present excitement—he did not think it advisable to keep the Norton appointment to see the jade collection. Lisabetta would not be up to it, nor would he himself. But the telephone disclosed the fact that Norton was neither at home nor at his bank. Everything seemed to be going wrong to-day.

What could the old fellow's notion be, to be-

tray him to the Federal authorities? It was like trying to pick up loose quicksilver.

He took the Appraiser's receipt from his pocket and studied it aimlessly, repeatedly drawing it through thumb and forefinger, as a man often does with a currency bill. Suddenly his interest became acute. The serial number of the receipt had become a smear, his thumb stained with printer's ink.

"Good Lord!" he cried.

He drew up the telephone and got the Appraiser's office. He called for the man with whom he had done some business but two days gone.

"What is the serial number of the Appraiser's receipts?" he asked. "What I want is the first numeral. . . . Yes, I'll hold the wire. . . ." Three minutes passed. "Hello! Yes, this is Ellison. . . . What? . . . Thank you. No; that's all I wish to know. Thanks."

Ellison pushed aside the telephone and took up the receipt again. He had been beautifully

hoodwinked, most beautifully. The serial number on the receipt indicated that it was months old. He laughed; he could not help it. For he had no redress. If he complained at the Appraiser's office, there would be a blow-up indeed, newspaper notoriety and all that. He understood Sandro Peruzzi now. The old scoundrel was free again, to commit any devilment he pleased; for he had the bogus Cellini plaque and his son-in-law had no power now to control his actions.

For himself he did not care particularly. He was amused. But Lisabetta . . . Ellison struck his desk with a clenched fist. War. So be it. He would break the old scalawag, since there did not seem to be any method of bending him. Break that rebel spirit even if it took half the Ellison fortune: and keep him out of jail besides.

Had he come to America? It was possible. Peruzzi was not the kind of a man who would trust that plaque to strangers. Gone—out of his hands forever, by a trick so clever that only

an extraordinary mind could have conceived it! The romance and the tender associations connected with the plaque and the rare beauty of it —no more his—filled him with poignant rage. The infernal old scoundrel! What mendacity was he now preparing to loose upon an unsuspecting world? War. So be it. Love against Irony.

If Peruzzi was in town, his first act would be to call and mock. Peruzzi could not possibly resist such an opportunity. Very good. He would be treated with courtesy, as if he had a perfect right to visit his daughter. Ellison would put Lisabetta on her guard, and the old boy's shafts of mockery should break themselves against shields of placidity. More: finding his mockery without effect, Peruzzi might grow bitter enough to give his son-in-law a clew to the true meaning of this new phase of rebellion.

The phase which bothered Ellison was that he had embarked upon a very costly, uncertain, though novel, enterprise; and this ironic bomb of Peruzzi's was like to careen the whole business

into limbo. Still, he had gone too far to back down; he must play out his hand, come good or ill of it.

He decided to call up Lisabetta—who, by the way, knew nothing about this enterprise—and assure her that there was nothing to worry about. And following is the conversation over the wire:

Ellison: Give me Mrs. Ellison, Charles.

Charles: (the butler): Mrs. Ellison has gone out, sir.

Ellison: What?—gone out? Where?

Charles: She did not say, sir.

Ellison (after a pause): Did she say when she would return?

Charles: No, sir. I spoke to her about luncheon. She said she wasn't sure, sir.

Ellison: She dressed and went out?

Charles: Yes, sir.

Ellison: Did she send for one of the cars?

Charles: No, sir. She ordered a taxi.

Ellison: All right, Charles. Dinner at seven-thirty as usual.

Ellison hung up the receiver. He was per-

turbed. Lisabetta never left the house without informing some one of the servants whither she was going and when she would return. She had dressed and hurriedly gone away in a taxicab. Ellison was jarred by an astounding thought. Her father! The old rogue had called her on the telephone and she had gone to meet him. The poor child! Why didn't she take it the way he did? The old fellow would probably wring some concession from Lisabetta, with more disrupting consequences. Hang it all!

His office secretary approached. "A newspaper man wishes to see you, Mr. Ellison."

"A reporter?"—aghast.

"No. He said he had an appointment and that the business office had sent him."

"Oh. Send him in. I had forgotten."

This conference lasted till luncheon time. Ellison called up the house again. Lisabetta had not yet returned. Well, that settled the tea at Norton's. He might just as well make it positive. But for the second time he was unable to locate Norton. He left word, however, both at

Norton's bank and at his home, that unexpected business made it impossible for Mr. and Mrs. Ellison to take tea that afternoon.

The Norton butler relayed this message to his master despite the fact that his master had left word not to be interrupted.

"Pardon me, sir, but this was imperative. Mr. Ellison says that he cannot possibly take tea with you this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," said Norton to Lisabetta.

Lisabetta did not reply. Her tongue had grown oddly thick and dry.

CHAPTER XVI

THE moment her husband was gone with the customs officials, Lisabetta rushed upstairs and dressed for the street. Next, she hunted through the telephone book for Norton's house and business numbers. He was not at the bank, she was informed; at the house the information received was that Norton would return at twelve-thirty for lunch. She called for a taxicab, which rather confused Charles, since there were three cars at the garage and she was capable of driving any of the three. When the taxicab arrived, she hurried out to it and was driven away.

She rode down the Avenue to the point where Broadway crosses, then back to the Park, then in and out of the Park drives, desperately striving to pass two hours. It was torture; but she was ready to suffer this and other tortures before she would permit her father to checkmate her husband.

They had been so happy! And now came this thunderbolt. Oh, Sandro Peruzzi was in the city; she knew it; and to defeat his new purpose, whatever it might be, she would give a year of her life. From the very beginning she had known that he would appear again, disastrously. How well she had described him! An Alpine stream, boiling and churning under ground; and now into the clear again, boisterous and uncontrolled. Betrayed the man who had treated him so generously. Why? The query ran into a thousand blind alleys and returned unanswered.

At precisely twelve-thirty she drove up to the Norton residence, paid and discharged the taxicab man, and ran up the steps to the door. The butler stared at her gravely for a moment, then stepped aside for her to enter.

"Mr. Norton is in?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Will you tell him that Mrs. Robert Ellison wishes to see him?"

The butler's eyebrows went up. "This way, Madam." He conducted her into the drawing

room, the beauty of which entered her eyes without striking the senses.

The butler proceeded to the dining room.

"Mrs. Ellison is in the drawing room, sir."

"What?" cried the astonished Norton. "Who?"

"Mrs. Robert Ellison."

"What in heaven's name can she want?"

"She did not say, sir."

Norton, thrilling, rose from the table and flung down his napkin. But almost at once the thrill departed, leaving him cold but curious. If ever a woman was madly in love with a husband, it would be this young woman he had met the other night. Why, the two of them were coming over to tea this afternoon. What in the world . . . He hurried off to meet his unexpected guest, not a little confused. Something strange had driven her into his house at this hour, and nothing that could be flattering to him.

"Why, Mrs. Ellison, I am delighted . . ."

"Wait!" Lisabetta interrupted. She was standing; she had not touched a chair, but had

paced the room feverishly. "I am here, Mr. Norton, upon a very strange errand. I wish to borrow your Cellini plaque."

"My plaque?" Was she mad? The great dark eyes, the exquisite pallor of her skin . . . "But, my dear Mrs. Ellison, this is a most unusual request. Won't you sit down?"

"No, no! I wish to borrow the plaque and the document that goes with it."

The passionate directness of the request, the palpable agitation, the Latin beauty of her, threw Norton into the greatest confusion he had yet known in the presence of a woman.

"Please sit down," he repeated, bewilderedly. The plaque? What the devil did she want with the Cellini plaque? "You mean the plaque I bought of your father?"

"Yes."

"But I don't understand. You are agitated. What has happened?"

"Could it not be possible for you to lend it to me without asking me why I wish it?"

"But the request is so astonishing! Someone

wishes to see it? Well, send them here. The fact is, I did not declare the plaque. Wrong not to, I know; but it would have got into the papers, and thieves . . . Well, you understand."

Lisabetta smiled her father's smile, but delicately. "You refuse?"

"You embarrass me. I don't want to refuse you. But that plaque . . . "

Lisabetta sat down: because she was afraid of falling down. She held her hands to her face for a moment.

"Mr. Norton," she said, "you are a gentleman. You have it in your power to save my husband and myself a great deal of unhappiness."

"You are in trouble?"—amazed. Never had he come into contact with anything like this before.

"Yes."

"And you cannot go to your husband?"

"Oddly enough, no; not in this instance. Please understand me. I love my husband. I . . . I want to save him a hurt."

"But how in the world can my plaque save him?" His bewilderment was mounting with bounds.

While in the taxicab she had thought rapidly. There had been a possibility of his letting her have the plaque without question; but she now saw that she had gone about the affair wrongly. Her Latin impulsiveness had spoiled everything; and her agitation had no doubt aroused his suspicions. Now, if she told him the truth, he would not take it so hard as if Robert told him. He would show mercy to the daughter of Sandro Peruzzi, when he would have shown it to none other.

"Excuse me for a moment," said Norton. He turned and left the room.

Lisabetta awaited his return, her apprehension almost agony. The sense of shame began to invade her. This was the house of the man her husband had warned her against. Had he gone to telephone Bobby? The thought of defeating her father's projects had dulled her perceptions; there were other angles which she saw for the

first time. But this man was a gentleman, despite Bobby's statements that he was not to be trusted.

Five minutes passed. The sweat of her palms stained her gloves. When Norton returned he carried an old Florentine jewel box under his arm. As he approached her he extended the box.

"Here it is," he said, smiling. "I was a bit bewildered. Take it."

"Without questions?" she cried.

"Yes. Keep it as long as you need it. But I'll say this to you: to no other person in the world would I trust it."

She placed the box on her knees, and smiled wanly.

"Thank you. For your kindness I shall tell you the truth. This plaque is very beautiful; but it was not made by Benvenuto Cellini. My father, who is a great artist and a bitter rebel against mankind, made it."

"What?" This invisible blow sent him back a step. "Your father made it?"

"Yes. My husband bought one just like it; but I did not know till it was too late. That is how we met."

Norton found a chair and sat down, stunned.

"There were others besides yourself and my husband. I could not denounce my father for his frauds. My husband kept his plaque with the threat that he would expose my father if he ever tried to dupe another collector. My father recently betrayed my husband to the customs officials, and he is now disarmed, having had to surrender the plaque to the Government. But it is my belief that the plaque will never reach the Government, that the customs officials were friends of my father. I know—though I haven't seen him—that my father is in the city, and I wanted your plaque to confound him. This explains why you never saw me at the villa. When there were strange men in the house, I always remained upstairs." Her voice began to falter. "I do not want shame to enter my husband's house."

Norton rose. "Mrs. Ellison, you are the

finest and honestest woman I have ever known. Keep the plaque as long as you need it. Tell your husband what you have done. Tell him that I am with him and that he can rely on me. But I shall want the plaque when it has served its purpose. It is a thing of exquisite beauty."

"I shall always remember this hour, Mr. Norton."

"Your father! How did your husband take it?"

"He is what you Americans call a sport. And, I believe, you are one, too."

"Ellison can afford to be one," said Norton, with a smile. Queer thing, he knew that this woman would be in his thoughts so long as he lived. He sighed. "I should like you to share my lunch, but I shall not ask you."

Here the butler came in to announce Ellison's message.

There was in Lisabetta's head, as she rode home with Norton's plaque, an old-wives' notion that all would end well now. She had cut the

tiger's claws and drawn his teeth. Once home, she hid the plaque in the library, in a convenient place, against the hour when her mocking father appeared. That he would shortly appear there was no doubt in her mind. She wasn't hungry, so she sat by the library fire and took up her knitting. And thus Ellison, coming home at three, found her.

"Betta," he began, "it was your father. Those chaps did not belong to the Customs. Their credentials were forgeries. Your dad has the plaque; and I don't know what the devil to do."

"Wait."

"What were you doing about town in a taxi when three cars were in the garage?"

"On the day my father appears I shall tell you, Bobby *mio*."

"You've found out where he is?"

"No. But we shall soon know. Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Lord, I'm so balled up I forgot, honey. Hang him, when everything was so cosy!"

"Bobby, we were just a little too happy. It wasn't right."

"I telephoned Norton's house that we couldn't get over for tea to-day. I'd have had a jolly time looking at the jade, with your father's sardonic smile appearing everywhere! What's he up to? I'll cut off his allowance as I promised."

"Doesn't it look as if he had done that?"

"Well, if it's war he wants, he shall have it."

"Let him make the first move. He will want to know what the effect of the coup is. And when he does come, Bobby, be careful of your temper. He revels in angry men."

"You've learned something?"

"Only what instinct tells me."

"All right, Betta. I'll sit tight. But I don't believe I shall sleep o' nights."

Lisabetta did not believe she would, either; but she kept this doubt to herself.

"Let's get the car and take a spin," he suggested.

She was very tired; but she nodded in assent.

At seven o'clock, while Ellison and Lisabetta were dressing for dinner, the doorbell rang; and Charles the butler answered the call. As he swung open the door, a dapper little man, gray-haired and gray-moustached, with a monocle set roguishly in his eye, entered and handed his hat and cane to the astonished butler.

"My coat," said Peruzzi. "Ah, yes; I am Sandro Peruzzi, and have come to dine with my daughter and son-in-law."

"Yes, sir," replied Charles, helplessly.

CHAPTER XVII

CHARLES the butler conducted Signor Peruzzi into the library and covertly noted that the little gentleman had been tailored in Europe, more particularly, on the continent. The long pointed shoes, the pearl buttons, the waist of the dinner coat, the antiquated style of the black cravat and white linen collar—all these signs indicated an abysmal ignorance of Bond Street. But there was in the little chap's manner a something belligerently sarcastic that neutralized Charles's sartorial contempt. As Peruzzi spread out his hands toward the fire, the butler saw for the first time the little knot of coloured ribbon in the little gentleman's buttonhole, and his attitude ceased to be condescending. Being an Englishman, he had a deep and reverent respect for court decorations.

"I'll announce you, sir," he said.

Alone, Peruzzi surveyed the room, and nodded in approval. Taste and luxury. Upon a table sat a glass vase which contained a single red rose. That would be Lisabetta's doing, he thought. She had never choked the villa with flowers; just a few scattered about the house. Well, she was a Peruzzi; and as he thought it over, he had done very well for Lisabetta. He smiled and sat down upon the lounge. He chuckled lightly. He, her father, had just added to her spending fund ten thousand a year. He hadn't thought of it from that angle before: that he would be Lisabetta's benefactor.

How delighted they would be to see him! The delight would be mutual. But one delight would be the antithesis of the other. Contrast. It was this unending contrast that made life possible, endurable. It was the seventy dollars he now had left in his wallet that gave him a thrill as of old wine. With a fat wallet he would, at this moment, be bored. But Sandro Peruzzi and seventy dollars, and the world against him!

Per Bacco! He sniffed. Well, yes; in a house like this one would miss the scent from the kitchen. For himself, he would like one of those famous American beefsteaks. His thought switched to Poggioli, back there in Florence, dining sumptuously once a day: and Sandro Peruzzi without the devil of a notion how he was going to foot the bill! Life, that was life.

He leaned against the arm of the lounge, and something white on the floor caught his attention. A lady's work-basket; probably Lisabetta's. He reached for it and drew it to his knees. The wife of an American millionaire; yet here she was, knitting and darning as in the old days at the villa.

Suddenly the ironic smile left his lips. He picked up something from the top of the basket and eyed it as perhaps Aladdin eyed the result of his first rubbing of the Lamp. His gaze sought the fire again; and he smoothed out the little thing in his palm over and over without realizing what he was doing. A strange fire

yonder. Cellini's salamander did not pass, but other things dead and forgotten this many a year.

A sound behind him. He turned his head and beheld his daughter and son-in-law in the doorway. Hastily and unconsciously he thrust the object he held in his hand into a pocket and rose.

"Ah!" he said, with a gesture which had three actions—his shoulders, his elbows, and his hands. "My daughter, my son-in-law. Lisabetta, you have grown more beautiful. My son, you have gained in dignity."

"Sir," replied Ellison, bowing gravely, "a compliment from you is something to be treasured."

"Well," returned Peruzzi, "it is true that I do not toss my compliments about carelessly. You are surprised to see me?"

"We expected you, sooner or later," said Ellison, amiably, though he was boiling.

"And you, *figlia mia?*"

"Oh, yes; we expected you. You are my father."

"You look well," observed Ellison.

"I am . . . tremendous! Spring is back in my veins again. I am almost young."

"Young enough to start life all over again," remarked Ellison, drily.

"Yes. My son, I lay at your feet ten thousand a year, with immortelles."

"Certainly that allowance of yours is very dead," agreed Ellison. He was beginning to enjoy himself. Lisabetta was right: there would be no getting anywhere with angry upbraidings. Banter for banter.

Peruzzi approached his daughter. "You do not offer me your hand."

She put out her hand slowly, her dark eyes vainly striving to penetrate that sardonic mask. She was glad he had come. There would be no more suspense. Was it mockery or reverence, this way he bent over her hand and kissed it? Had it been reverence . . . But, no! An idle dream, that. Sandro Peruzzi revered nothing.

"My son," said the Mocker, "you should en-

dow me with half a million. I sold you a plaque, but I gave you my daughter."

"And for that," replied Ellison, "I shall always hold for you in my heart a kindness. Otherwise I should be inclined to take you by the scruff of your neck and propel you into the street."

"Dinner is served," announced the grave Charles.

"Will you join us, Father?" asked Ellison.

"With pleasure, my son."

After the fish Ellison asked: "And what will you be doing from now on?"

"*Ebbene*, I shall amuse myself."

"Upon what?"

"Upon my unconquerable zest of life. Have I not said I was young again?"

"What is that order you wear?" asked the son-in-law. "I do not seem to recognize it."

"Order?" Peruzzi glanced at his buttonhole, and laughed. "That is no order. It is a silk cigar band that took my fancy. But it makes quite an impression at the hotel."

Ellison had to laugh. "I suppose the basis of all this recklessness is the winning of a fortune at Monte Carlo."

"*Per Bacco!* I have had no luck there. And gambling begins to bore me. There are no longer any great risks."

"Do you stop to think of the morality of your conduct of this morning? I paid you thirty thousand for that plaque which you regained this morning under fraud."

"That was clever, wasn't it? But that plaque was the key to my prison."

"Father," interposed Lisabetta, "have you no grain of honour left within you?"

"La, la! Betta, you are always spoiling my dramatic moments. Honour? Honour has naught to do with this. It is a game; and one never plays games piously. Was your husband honourable when he bought the plaque from Poggioli, who had confessed that he had stolen it from me? *La catena a fuori.* The chain is off; the bars are down. The sole was delicious."

What to do with a man like that?

"Father, do you never think of to-morrow?" asked Lisabetta, coldly.

"*Domani?* To-morrow? Ah, the next chapter! Who can resist thinking about and building upon it. To-morrow I shall be amusing myself."

"More plaques?"

"More fools. It is astonishing how the supply keeps undiminished."

"Peruzzi, what is behind this bitterness of yours toward human beings, your own flesh and blood included? It isn't normal. Here is Betta, your daughter, whose soul is like a white flame and whose tenderness is like that of angels."

Peruzzi laughed. "Angels? Rafaele's or Bellini's? For I admit that there are no female angels beyond those daubed on canvas. Ah! *Per Malatesta!* Beefsteak? Surely you must have known that I would come to-night. Delicious!"

"Charles," said Ellison, "a small bottle of chambertin for my father. I forgot to order it."

"Yes, sir."

Peruzzi sent an admiring glance toward his son-in-law. The boy was not without wit; but he was not with Sandro Peruzzi—who might have been great could he have found a way to greatness, when greatness had been worth something.

"What do you think of New York?" asked Ellison.

"Beauty and sordidness elbowing each other; beauty corrupted by these advertising signs. But your buildings—what do you call them?"

"Skyscrapers."

"Ah, yes! There is the real beauty of New York. Certain minds deride these shining towers. But what is more beautiful than the aloofness against the sky, serene above the turmoil, like the Alps?"

"Thank you."

"Not at all, not at all. My son, this is a rare wine. I believed there was none in the country."

"My father's cellar, perfectly within the law."

"Yes; I shall like New York. I expect to remain here for some time." Peruzzi smiled as

he recollected his attenuated wallet. And the thought came that, if he called often enough, this son of his would be willing to pay his fare to Italy in order to get rid of him.

He must write Poggioli to sell the trinkets in the cellar. There would be enough out of that to carry him back to Florence, to the meager dole the estate paid him. Thanks to the gods, that was clear.

"Excuse me just a moment," said Ellison.

He went directly to the library telephone and called up his chauffeur at the garage. The chauffeur was to bring the car to the door. He was to follow the man who would come out later, follow him if it took him to Long Island and back. In time, he was to learn at what hotel the man was stopping. Then Ellison returned to the dining room.

"You were calling the police?" asked Peruzzi.

"Not yet,' answered Ellison.

"Ah, yes! I have the proof of my rascality. You might, however, invite me to spend the days of my visit here."

Ellison laughed. "My dear father-in-law, I would as soon let a cobra loose in the house. You understand compliments."

"Perfectly," replied Peruzzi. "You are quite right, considering that my fangs are back in place again." He began to attack his portion of the steak.

To Lisabetta there was something theatrically false about this banter. She saw the stark tragedy between the lines: that her father hated Bobby who in turn hated him. Of course Bobby would never confess to this. The quality of this banter was revealing. Her father had come here for the sole purpose of gloating over the man who so recently had trapped him! Her father, free again to bedevil her happiness! Suddenly she remembered Norton's plaque, and she smiled.

"Father, there is a saying . . . " she began.

"Yes, yes, *cara mia*. Who laughs last laughs best."

"Well," she said, her smile taking an ironical twist like his own, "remember that."

Father and lover looked at her curiously, but

she had begun to split her artichoke, ignoring the scrutiny.

Dinner over, the three of them went into the library for coffee. Here he told the story of the typewriter, spiced with rollicking banter.

"And I gave him the last five thousand I had in the world!"

"Why?" Ellison offered the cigar humidor.

"Because I was bored by being virtuous and craved amusement, my son."

"And your notion is to return to Florence and sell more Cellini plaques?"

"You read the future like the Cumæan Sibyl."

Ellison lit and blew upon the coal of his cigar. He could, with a wave of his hand, demolish this banter of Peruzzi's. He had it in his power to destroy the man, for at his age prison would mean death. But there was that stupendous notion to conquer the rebel without destroying him. It would depend upon time: whether he could complete these plans before Peruzzi completed his. The die of the Cellini plaque had been destroyed; but it was now evident that

there were other plaques in reserve, hidden only Peruzzi knew where.

For ten thousand Poggioli had betrayed his master. For the sum mentioned the man had given Giovanni Lucchesi the names and addresses of all the other dupes.

"There is many a slip 'twixt cup and the lip," said Ellison.

"Yes; and this time it is your cup that has slipped," replied Peruzzi, a cloud of tobacco smoke rolling above his head. "You now have no power to hinder my actions. What was it that English poet said?—'I am captain of my soul, I am master of my fate.' I believe that is the way it goes. Clever, wasn't it? An accident, of course; but I was prompt to make use of it. So there you are."

Lisabetta rose and crossed the room, pausing before one of the bookshelves. She extracted three or four books and brought out a package. With this in her hand she returned to the fire lounge, stood before her father, stared at him for a moment, then smiled.

"I warned you, Father, that who laughs last laughs best."

She unwrapped the package and displayed before her father's startled eyes a Cellini plaque and the document of authenticity.

Tableau, which lasted fully a minute. For if Peruzzi was dumfounded, Ellison was equally so.

Suddenly Peruzzi struck his thigh and laughed. The laughter came from his diaphragm, too. He stood up and adjusted his monocle. Then he bowed with his hand upon his heart.

"Lisabetta, you are a Peruzzi, all a Peruzzi!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ELLISON was not certain which sensation gripped him the stronger: his admiration for Peruzzi's facile and humorous acceptance of the amazing situation, or his curiosity as to where Lisabetta had secured this plaque, which he recognized—with a humorous quirk of thought—was a genuine Peruzzi. He saw one thing clearly, that Peruzzi loved these quiet dramatic moments with all the appreciation of a dramatist—these rapier thrusts in the dark.

It might be—was one of Ellison's thoughts—that Lisabetta had stolen the plaque from her father back in Florence and had secreted it against this hour. Yet, in that event, would not Peruzzi have discovered the loss? Certainly the amiable reincarnation of Machiavelli's brain and Cellini's hand would have kept close watch of his precious horde of plaques.

Yes, yes; the old boy was worth a fight, worth saving, a hundred times yes. For here he was in New York, confessedly broke, back inside his figurative prison, and he could laugh and compliment Lisabetta upon her stroke!

He could not—must not—ask her any questions before her father; that would not be fair; besides, Peruzzi must be forced to remain in the dark.

"Betta," said Peruzzi, "if you could have seen through my eyes, in the old days, these crawling things called human beings, what sport we two might have had!"

"Father, can you be made to understand that it cannot go on?" she said, with a quick Italian gesture expressive of tragedy.

"You have no true sense of the drama, Betta." Peruzzi turned to Ellison. "Is there any possibility of making a bargain?"

"What kind?" answered Ellison, coldly.

"My fare back to Italy."

Ellison exulted inwardly. Nothing could have pleased him more than this admitted fact, that

his father-in-law hadn't enough for transportation home. He had the old boy; he had him!

"The terms were explicit," he said. "You disregarded them. Who laughs last laughs best."

Peruzzi did not reply. He walked over to the humidor and carefully selected five coronas. He calmly distributed them in his several pockets, and sighed, with a covert glance at Lisabetta. He might be able to start her charity into action; there would be no hope in Ellison.

Said he: "Let us suppose that I have perhaps five years longer to live. I shall have thrown away fifty thousand dollars. You cannot object, therefore, to these five coronas."

"Will you have a cordial?" asked Ellison.

"*Per Bacco!* you are a thorough gentleman."

The old cordial was brought, and Peruzzi sipped it dreamily, standing.

"The passage to Italy is not much," he remarked.

"Do you remember your daughter's shoes, split and rundown?"

"She would not walk my way," said Peruzzi, gently.

Lisabetta's heart ached. She had had so much happiness that she was mercifully inclined.

"Bobby *mio* . . . "

But Ellison interrupted her sharply. "He must pay. He is a very wonderful chemist. Let him go to his trade for his passage money."

Peruzzi chuckled; but there came into his mind the picture of a pawnshop and the spurious emerald necklace.

"Betta, will you tell me where you got that plaque?" he asked, suddenly.

"Ha!" cried Ellison. "Your curiosity is stronger than mine. I haven't asked. And I know no more about it than you do."

"But, yes; when I am gone Donna Lisabetta will tell you," replied Peruzzi.

Ellison said to his wife: "Will you?"

"Yes." But something passed over her face, a flitting cloud of tragic thought. It was an expression similar to that she had offered him

that night in Florence when she had told him that she would never marry.

"My son-in-law," said Peruzzi, pulling down the sides of his coat, "I still have beaten you. But for Lisabetta I should have won. But I can forgive Lisabetta; she is a Peruzzi. *Buona notte.*"

With a smart gesture he walked into the hall, where Charles the butler made haste to get his hat, his coat and cane. He walked out of the house like a man with a Baku oil concession in his pocket, in reality thinking that the sumptuous dinner he had eaten must last him till the following noon.

"Lisabetta," said Ellison, "where in God's name did you get that plaque?"

"From Mr. Norton. He loaned it to me."

"Norton? Was that where you went to-day?"

"Yes"—the brave eyes looking straight into his.

"So he fell for it, too." Ellison sat down and held his head in his hands for a moment. Then

he looked up, his expression kindly but whimsical. "You told him the truth?"

"Yes."

"He . . . "

"Wait. He is an honourable man, Bobby. When I told him that I desperately needed the plaque, he gave it to me without question. Then I told him why I needed it."

"Did he make a row?"

"No, Bobby *mio*. He laughed. He is like you—a good sport."

"Who saw you there?"

"Only the butler."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you let me go for it? Good God . . . !"

"Because there would have been threats and high words. You two men together . . . I was a woman. He knows that I love you better than anything else on God's earth and that I was trying to prevent shame—disgrace—from entering this house."

Ellison went to her and took her into his arms.

"*Cara mia,* your voice cups my heart as a palm cups the chin. Norton's butler—if he talks it may hurt you."

"Mr. Norton will never let him talk."

"All right, honey. The infernal old scalawag! If he rooked Norton, he rooked a keener man than I am."

"You will not give Father his fare home?" It was a query saturated with wistfulness. "Who knows, Bobby? All this might be some species of madness; something of which we know nothing."

"Betta," said Ellison, firmly, "your father stays here till he has learned his lesson. He should have been upon the stage where nothing is reality but appears to be. As it is, nothing wins his respect but the theatrical. If he ever surrenders in this queer war of his against mankind, the surrender will come about by some novel adventure, something highly dramatic. Pleading will not do it; neither will appeals to his honour. He must be struck by his atrophied sense of shame; and Sandro Peruzzi is the proud-

est man I know. It is a terrible pride, but nevertheless it is pride. I do not mean shame, honey, in the sense of honour. I mean that by the confrontation of something so magnanimous he cannot avoid yielding."

"And where is this thing?"

"Heaven knows! But I am going to have him rigorously watched so that no real misfortune will befall him. I'll find out his hotel and advise the office to send the bill to me weekly. He will know nothing and will believe that his account is growing and growing. He will doubtless make enquiries at the office and they will inform him that there is no hurry. Perhaps he will go to work; and heaven guide me to the place when he does!"

"To gloat over him, Bobby?"—sadly.

"Honey, mine was a despicable thought. I apologize."

"Oh, Bobby, Bobby, and I would have loved him so! A gay little man, unafraid of life, mocking fate and death, and a genius who has been ignored and scorned. Riches? Oh, I know him,

Bobby. Money wasn't his god, since he threw it away."

"Gambling."

"Was it gambling? Wasn't it a means of not benefitting by his ill-gotten gains? Wasn't it the pure ironic sport of the thing—to rook the men who never would have acknowledged his genius in the true sense?"

"Had he been tender to you . . . "

"Could he have deceived the world if he had been tender to me? Treating me as he did, was not that a buckler against mercy?"

"Betta," said Ellison, kissing her hand, "he is right. You are every inch a Peruzzi in the mind and an angel in the heart. I shan't let him suffer. I shall only make him believe he will have to. I'll carry back the plaque in the morning. You are right about Norton; and I am wrong. Now run along to bed."

Alone, he rubbed his hands jubilantly. Peruzzi was his; for the man's sublime ingeniousness could not surmount the predicament he was in, if he had not lied about the lack of funds.

He could not appeal to Poggioli because that gentleman was already on his way to Sicily, where he purposed to live.

Ellison decided to work a little; but as he sat at his desk the butler entered.

"Beg pardon, sir, but Mr. Peruzzi is on the wire."

Ellison hurried into the hall, disturbed.

Ellison: Well, Father-in-law, what is it?

Peruzzi: Are you there?

Ellison: Yes.

Peruzzi: Then I wish to say that I forgot to tell you that I am no longer bored.

Click.

Ellison slowly hung up the receiver. Now what? Or had Peruzzi really forgotten his farewell shaft and had sent it over the wire? Ellison laughed. Lord, if only he could conquer the old scoundrel; what a comrade he would make!

Peruzzi walked for several blocks. He was in a serious frame of mind. It did not matter which one of his American dupes had lent Lisa-

betta the plaque. He was done, beaten. With the small sum of money he had he must spend a considerable part of it to cable Poggioli to sell the trinkets in the cellar. Once home, he could manage for a while with the meagre rents of the estate. He had been forced to do that more than once in the days of adversity.

All at once he recollected that he could not walk all the way to the hotel. And he did not know what tram to take; and he was ignorant of the subway. More money out of his pocket, if he hailed a taxicab. He turned into what he thought to be a side street and found himself upon Fifth Avenue, with a downtown 'bus rumbling beside the curb. In a little while he was at the hotel, and in a better frame of mind. He then sent his humorous message to his son-in-law. After that he hummed the prologue from "I Pagliacci."

He took out one of his precious coronas, carefully cut it in two and began to smoke. But after three or four puffs he tossed the weed upon the ashtray.

"Faugh!"

He had been saving his last Florentine cheroot. This he cut as he had the corona and stuck it into the holder. After such a defeat to his plans, he had a right to a comfortable smoke. He felt into a side pocket for a match, and his fingers came into contact not with his matchbox but with a substance made of soft yarn. He pulled this out and studied it, the object lying on his palm. His gaze turned to the window, the winter stars and the city lights. His eyes presently returned to the object in his palm. It was a tiny woollen sock, exquisitely knit.

Peruzzi took out his monocle and held it against the light. He was equally alarmed and astonished. Sandro Peruzzi had shed a tear!

CHAPTER XIX

TWO weeks passed. Peruzzi made no attempt to communicate with his daughter or with his son-in-law. He was as gay and debonair as ever; but through the barricades to his heart had seeped the feel of loneliness. No matter how many times he saw the hotel lobby, it never grew familiar to his eye. Nor did the streets, the intersecting confusions, the penetration of the sea cold. He was not accustomed to the stuffy warmth of his room, so outside he felt the cold more keenly. The only joy of the day was the restaurant he had discovered near by—Italian, where he could get his beloved spaghetti and his cheroots. In this restaurant his soul expanded; he heard and talked his native tongue, he could eat the simple wholesome food of his country.

Why did Poggioli refuse to answer his cable

about the sculptures in the cellar? Of course, Poggioli was generally hard pressed for funds. But it was two weeks since the cable, and by this time a letter might have arrived. Moreover, it was to Poggioli's best interests. The old game could be started again the moment he, Peruzzi, was in Florence.

Humour. Sometimes it was costly. And yet there were times when a man, for the sake of a hearty laugh, was ready to give up his life. He could have given the man Reffe twenty-five hundred instead of five thousand. But he had been so sure of his coup that it had seemed worth five thousand to indulge in a colossal chuckle.

And Lisabetta had beaten him—Lisabetta, the dark-eyed fawn. Each time he thought of it he had to chuckle. Where she had got the plaque was a small detail; the fact that upset him was that she had it, and that her husband could make him the son of Hagar.

One thing distressed him. His brain no longer conceived sculptural objects. He did not believe that he could make anything new. He was

like a pianist who had left the instrument for years, and memory no longer ran down into his fingers. It was possible that the inspiration was lacking because there was nothing to urge it. The plaque, one of the most beautiful things he had ever done, evidently had been the last glow of his genius; the grate was now filled with ashes. *He* hadn't failed; the world—humanity—had failed him.

He realized, at the end of these two weeks, that he must approach the cashier's desk and ask for the bill. He knew that in Europe bills were presented weekly. He was, of course, unfamiliar with the American modus operandi, but his deduction was that hotel bills were the same the world over.

When at length he asked at the desk for his bill, wondering in the name of Bacchus how he was going to pay it, the clerk smiled.

"Tell me when you are ready to go, sir, and then we shall present the bill."

"Very well," said Peruzzi, and turned away,

not knowing whether he was pleased or disturbed by this unusual leniency.

After all, it was comfortable here, though he had not entered the hotel restaurants for days. He had found a place where he could purchase his beloved cheroots and he had carried to the hotel a good supply. Thus, when he felt the pangs of hunger, he smoked. For tobacco before meals kills the appetite or numbs it temporarily. (Heaven forgive me for telling the world for the first time this fact!)

He had a fine Swiss watch. It was useless so far as necessity went. He never had any occasion to use it; he never was due anywhere at any time. So one night he sought a pawnshop a mile or so from the hotel and pledged the watch. He was advanced thirty dollars. He ate some Hungarian goulash before he went to bed that night.

Many times he had taken out the spurious emerald necklace. It was an extraordinary thing, but it wasn't art. Some day he would

take it to the pawnbroker who had taken the watch. There would be hope in that shop.

Often he would walk miles up Fifth Avenue, with the hope of seeing Lisabetta. To beg? No. Sandro Peruzzi might enter a public almshouse, but never would he beg. All he wanted was to see Lisabetta in her luxurious sedan and say: "I put her there!"

Whenever he left the hotel for a stroll, a man with a broad but pleasant face, ordinarily dressed, would follow him. Now, as Peruzzi had done nothing for which to be followed, his thoughts were always empty of such a sensation. And the man who followed him was clever; he was high-priced because of his cleverness. Daily he made his reports to his employer, and these reports were minute and comprehensive. One thing there was of which Peruzzi was not aware: the pawnbroker who had loaned on the watch was warned not to purchase anything.

Two weeks had gone, then; Peruzzi was entering upon the third with considerable doubt as to what the week would bring forth. The money

for his watch was dwindling. Much as he loved spaghetti, his gorge was now beginning to rise at the thought of it. He wanted rice and chicken livers, endive salad, a *tournados* with potatoes sauté, a bottle of chambertin, and a pot of black coffee, preferably café à la Turque. When he did drink coffee it was a weak substance, the colour of the Arno in the spring and of about the same taste.

Why didn't Poggioli write? What had become of the infernal laggard? Had he gone to Venice upon one of his picture hunts? Pictures. No; those in the villa were excellent copies, but such things were not sold in the open market, particularly in Florence, where every masterpiece was having ten copies the day made. Chromos, too.

His clothes would happily serve him indefinitely; and his linen and shoes were sound.

Nor was he bored. Whenever he looked the situation in the face, the old ironic chuckle bubbled in his throat. Sandro Peruzzi had played a hand without knowing what the stakes were!

Not bored, but lonely. Often, in the Florentine days, when he had been down to his last *soldi*, he had had the galleries to wander through, the Piazza Vittorio to stroll about, the shady arcades and the tables in front of the restaurants. Seldom had been the time when some friend hadn't offered him either coffee or beer.

He had no notion how much he was in debt to the hotel. One morning, as he was leaving his room, he witnessed a scene that intrigued him. Some man opposite stood in the doorway of his room, signing his name to a breakfast check. That night Peruzzi dressed for dinner with scrupulous care and summoned a waiter. Nonchalantly he ordered an excellent dinner, ate it, and when the waiter came to carry the tray away, Peruzzi signed the check and gave the waiter as large a tip as he dared. A man who stole ten *centesimi* was quite as much a thief as he who stole a thousand lire. The meal was four dollars and seventy cents. Peruzzi waited for the check to be returned dishonoured; he waited till eleven o'clock. Then he lit one of the

coronas and went downstairs to listen to the hotel orchestra. In the morning he tried the same adventure. No one questioned his financial integrity; and his chin went up. Sooner or later the money would come from Poggioli, and Sandro Peruzzi would go home.

But there was the necklace. So one day he carried it—shamed within him because he was basically honourable—to the pawnbroker. The man's eyes nearly fell out upon his cheeks as he gazed at the green loveliness.

"I wish a loan on this, or to sell it."

"Nix, mun friendt."

"What?"

"No," said the pawnbroker, who had been prompted. "Too goot! I vould not dare. Do you own 'em? Where dit you git 'em? How aboudt der police who are always snoopin' around. Vhere iss your dockyments of proofs? No? Vell, don'dt you see. Py der vay, der interest on dot vatch iss due nexdt veek."

Peruzzi went out into the street. He paused to look at the trinkets in the window. He saw

a fine violin hanging above and wondered what poor devil had had to surrender this part of his soul. Well, he visited ten pawnshops, and none would touch the emerald necklace because he had no proof of the identity. It would seem that the proverbial luck of the Peruzzi was changing for the worse.

The hotel bill began to worry him more than anything else. Yet, there was a vague feeling that in the end his son-in-law would clear him and send him home. But why didn't he send him home now? What was the object in keeping him in this particular cage? Ellison had a plaque; he had the whiphand; Sandro Peruzzi was neatly trapped; he could not sell a plaque. Ah, but couldn't he? After all, how was Ellison to know . . . Ah, yes; he had been carefully watched in Florence. Sure of being watched in Italy, why did Ellison hold him here? It was baffling. Peruzzi was sure that Lisabetta did not know her husband's purpose, and would not have told if she had. So then, it was evident that Ellison had some game to play

and that it was necessary to keep his father-in-law within reach.

He made a gesture, passionate and anathematic, toward the misty towers of New York, and returned to the hotel.

CHAPTER XX

UPON the morning of the buffeting adventure of Peruzzi and the pawnbroker, Ellison received an illuminating as well as an astonishing letter from Giovanni Lucchesi. It contained the information about Peruzzi's wife, of whom so few seemed to know anything. And when he had finished this letter, he bent his head. He knew Peruzzi, he knew the wild rebel heart of him that no one had ever attempted to tame by kindness. He saw now why Lisabetta had been a daughter and nothing more.

Lucchesi and his wife had been spending a few days in Rome and had accidentally come upon a strange piece of news which related to Peruzzi's youth. His wife, young, beautiful, highly born, had made a hell on earth for the artist, at the very time when his creative genius, his dreams, were nearing their zenith if not approaching the consideration of the world. Luc-

chesi had met a comrade of Peruzzi's youth, and this comrade had opened the door to the past.

The woman, whom Peruzzi had loved with Latin madness, had married him to spite a man who had jilted her. During the few years they had lived together she had been absolutely true; but she, too, was Latin, disappointed in love, and took it out on Peruzzi. Peruzzi could not beat her, cast her into the street, because he knew her to be an honourable woman. But for all that, she broke his life both ways—in love and in art. She had crucified him with a malice of a Borgian ingenuity, mocked his love, mocked his genius, till suddenly he turned upon organized society in such a way that Rome no longer tolerated him and bade him begone. The two had gone to Florence. Ellison read and reread the letter half a dozen times.

Dear God, why hadn't the old fool turned to Lisabetta? True, she would have been a little child at that period, and by the time she had reached womanhood or was approaching it, it had been too late: the blind spot in Peruzzi's

mentality had become permanent, and he had become fixed in his purpose to wage ironic warfare against society. The poor devil! The poor lonely old codger! Funny thing, how easy it was to judge by appearances rather than by facts.

Ellison destroyed the letter by burning it and scattering the ashes in the wastebasket. Lisabetta must never know. She had an illusion about her mother of whom she had no recollection; she was always conjuring up a woman beautiful, gentle, and kind, the victim of her father's atrocious irony.

Ellison had only a few minor threads to pick up to complete the magnificent adventure upon which he had embarked. In a few days, when these bothersome threads were in his hands, he would strike the bell.

But where the deuce was the old boy eating? Determined to find out about this, he called up the hotel and inquired, to be informed that till the last few days Signor Peruzzi had eaten not at the hotel but elsewhere. He was now ordering from the restaurant and signing. Elli-

son laughed. The old boy was now completely in his hands: he was at the end of his resources. But the resistance to the hotel menu and the pawning of the watch spoke of a hatred of actual thievery. Well, in a little time Sandro Peruzzi would be presented with the most terrific *whimsical* shock he had ever known.

The secretary came in to announce that a Mr. Pearson wished to see him. Ellison was joyful. Here was the last one of the bunch, the man who had been most difficult to find.

"Send him right in."

Mr. Pearson was middle-aged, turkey gobbler in the jowls and evidently choleric in the mind.

"Are you Mr. Robert Ellison, son-in-law of Sandro Peruzzi?"

"Yes. Be seated."

"You wrote a letter to my father."

"And he has delegated you to answer it in person?"

"My father's dead. I am his son. I found your letter among his effects. And I tell you here and now, Mr. Ellison, that I'm not the fool

my father was. You can't save that damned rogue of a Peruzzi just because he happens to be your father-in-law."

Trouble ahead, thought Ellison, perturbedly. "I hear perfectly. Or perhaps you are deaf. Deaf persons always talk a little too loud. Besides, my letter to your father does not prove Sandro Peruzzi a rogue. It merely admitted that he possessed genius of extraordinary type for these degenerate days."

"Pah! No one can get the best of me or mine and get away with it," said the truculent Pearson.

"Will you come with me for a moment?" asked Ellison, gravely. The father would have been more to his choice. This chap had a chip on both shoulders, and the situation was ticklish. Besides, he had no sense of humour.

Reluctantly the choleric Pearson agreed. He was conducted to the office of Ellison's attorneys, across the hall, to the chief counsel.

"John," said Ellison, "this is Mr. Pearson—the son. You'll recollect the name."

"Ah, yes."

"It appears that his father died before he could answer my letter."

The attorney laughed. "I see. What's the difficulty?"

"Evidently," said Ellison, "he holds the fraud, and threatens to put my father-in-law in prison."

"My dear sir," said the disciple of Blackstone, "you haven't a leg to stand on. The letter says that Sandro Peruzzi is one of the greatest sculptors in miniature in modern times, and that he wishes, through his son-in-law, to buy back the so-called Cellini plaques. Where's the fraud?"

"The letter, you forget," said Pearson, "says that this Peruzzi made the plaque himself. That means he sold it as Cellini's."

"How much did your father pay for the plaque?"

"Twenty thousand."

"Correct."

"Damn it!" cried the now virtuous Pearson, "it's the principle of the thing."

"Precisely," said the man of law. "And we are going to offer you the principal of the thing—twenty thousand."

"That was the price at which my father bought it. Things grow with time," went on Pearson, "and twenty thousand, you know, at 20 per cent., compound interest, for seven years . . ."

"Well, well!" interrupted the attorney. "This *is* a principal! You are asking for seventy thousand dollars?"

"What?" exploded Ellison.

"Seventy-one thousand six sixty-three, I believe," said Pearson, now tranquil of voice.

The attorney, with pad and pencil, made the computation. "Yes, seventy-one thousand; that's about what it comes to. But, Mr.——"

"Pearson."

"Ah, yes; Pearson."

"I shall not pay any blackmail," said Ellison, firmly.

"Sh! Mr. Ellison, the man is right. He has you by the hip. He can ruin Peruzzi, and the

rebound will hurt your wife dreadfully. Pay him. Where is the plaque?"

"I'll produce that in due time," answered Pearson.

"All right," said the attorney. "But you will have to sign an agreement absolving Peruzzi totally. You see, you might some day come back."

"So long as I get my seventy-one thousand, I don't mind signing a pæan of virtue regarding this old scoundrel."

"By the way," said the attorney, "I forgot. You have credentials proving you to be the son of Pearson?"

"I have, and here they are."

The attorney ran over the documents carefully. They were all in good form. "Very good. I'll have the document ready in a minute. You know, of course, that all this is pure blackmail?"

"It is permitted," said Pearson, with a laugh, "for one blackmailer to blackmail another."

"Wait a minute," said Ellison, boiling with

wrath. "What your father bought was one of the most beautiful miniature sculptures in existence. Your father did not buy trash. He bought what will be known a hundred years from now as a genuine Peruzzi. He did not force your father to buy it. He even refused to sell it for a time."

"A part of the game. I do not feel the least guilt in blackmailing you."

"And yet," said the attorney, "blackmail is a prison offense."

"So it is. But if I go to jail Mister Peruzzi goes likewise. So there you are. Mighty easy blackmail, too. I've got you where I want you. Now get your document ready and I'll sign it . . . when the certified check is put into my hands."

"And where is the plaque?"

"When the check is certified, you will bring it along to the hotel and I'll give you the plaque."

"Well, that's fair enough."

"Suppose we start for the bank right now?" suggested Pearson, eager to be gone.

"Just a moment," said the attorney, smiling. He pressed a desk button. A young woman entered. "Miss Moore, bring the dictograph roll that has just been registered."

As he uttered these words, Pearson jumped from his chair. Ellison caught him roughly by the arm and forced him to listen to the conversation which had taken place.

"You see?" said the attorney. "In New York blackmail for a toothpick is felonious. If you were worth ten millions, your chances would be exactly what they are now. Turn the plaque over to Mr. Ellison; for I can see by the bulge of your coat pocket that you have the plaque with you. Refuse, and I'll call the police. Peruzzi is in Italy and cannot be reached. Well?"

For a few minutes Pearson was like a tiger in a cart trap, such as they use in India. Suddenly the man wilted.

"You've got me. Give me the check for twenty thousand."

This was done, and the attorney summoned a clerk.

"Take this check over to Mr. Ellison's bank and have it certified. While you're on the way, Mr. Ellison will telephone the cashier. You need not surrender the plaque, Mr. Pearson, till the check returns."

Three quarters of an hour later Ellison carried the plaque to his office. The great adventure was ready to be launched.

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE Hotel Admiral, where Peruzzi lived because the irony of fate had made it impossible for him to live anywhere else: Peruzzi, growing a shade more terrified each day at the lack of news from Poggioli and the shadow of the mounting hotel bill—at the Hotel Admiral, then, they had the habit of leaving a morning newspaper outside the door, a complimentary newspaper. When Peruzzi had first discovered the paper, he had carried it to the floor-desk, only to be told that it was the custom of the hotel to give its guests a newspaper each morning.

Peruzzi read English as well as he spoke it; so he would read the cable news of the day—because little or nothing of American politics interested him. Then he would glance through the shipping news, always with the regret of a man

who could have bought a sovereign for a shilling and didn't. He soon began to read the paper through and through to pass the time, and the diversity of the advertisements, giving him an idea of what Americans bought and sold, attracted him constantly. Then, there was the immensity of the journal, sixteen or twenty-odd pages. He began to read the editorial pages, where he found art and literary criticisms.

Foreigners do not read newspapers after the fashion of Americans—skimming it. The average American newspaper is appalling for its voluminousness; the foreign newspaper is generally four pages, printed to be read thoroughly.

Very well, then. Peruzzi read everything after a while; he began to relish the passion-fighting qualities of the American politician. Anybody could call *him* a liar and all he would do would be to ask for an investigation, which nine times out of ten nobody would grant

him. In Europe there would have been bloodshed.

To-day he swung open the newspaper to the editorial page, to see if there was anything new in regard to the Franco-German reparation muddle. A quarter-page advertisement on the opposite page caught his attention. He stared. His eyes seemed literally stuck in his head: he could not swing them away from the amazing thing he saw. He jumped to his feet and ran to the window. Nothing outside had changed. His eyes were normal. He returned to the newspaper. The advertisement was precisely as he had seen it from the first.

"Mother of God!" he whispered.

Suddenly the truth burst upon him—what he believed to be the truth. Poggioli! The damned scoundrel had robbed and betrayed him; for aside from Lisabetta and the woman Rosa, no one had known of the chest in the villa cellar. And Rosa, who hated him, had opened the door. He seized upon the newspaper again:

TO-DAY

The Great Peruzzi
In the Ballroom of the Hotel Admiral!
First exhibition of the miniature sculptures
of Sandro Peruzzi
The greatest sculptor of miniatures of our times
Exhibition lasting for four days, two till six.
All the objects on sale Saturday
TO-DAY
The Great Sandro Peruzzi of Florence!

Then came the list of patrons and patronesses —the most distinguished names on the American art and social register. Poggioli! He would kill the ungrateful dog on sight.

For a little while Peruzzi acted like a madman. The great Peruzzi! He laughed, gesticulating wildly. Was there another Sandro Peruzzi? He would have to see these works of art first. Florence! He wasn't quite sure that his brain wasn't giving way. He rang for the floor valet. He pointed to the advertisement.

"Where is this ballroom?"

"On the top floor, sir."

"Bring me the man in charge of it," commanded Peruzzi, striking his breast. "My name is Sandro Peruzzi. I am an artist, and I know nothing of this affair."

"Yes, sir," said the valet, rather frightened at the little man's vehemence.

The man in charge eventually appeared. So far as he knew the real Peruzzi was living quietly in Florence, Italy.

"Is there among the objects a chrysoprase fawn in flight?"

"Yes." The manager showed his surprise, for this affair, with the exception of the preview by the art critics, was a mysterious one.

"Thank you. That is all I wish to know," said Peruzzi.

Alone again, Peruzzi sat down and held his head in his hands for a moment. The greatest sculptor of miniatures of modern times. The phrase rang like a buzzing bell in his head. The great Peruzzi! He got up, put on his hat and coat, and took the lift to the ballroom. He was

told there that he could not enter till two o'clock, and that he must have a card. Being a guest of the hotel, the office would furnish him with a card of admission.

Peruzzi then went down to the lobby and recklessly purchased the other morning papers. He found the same advertisement in each. Stunned, he sat down in a lobby chair and tried to grasp the reins of his runaway thoughts, but the effort was futile. He saw that he must wait till the doors opened.

He asked many questions, but no one seemed to know who had arranged this exhibit. Poggioli; he could not think of any one but Poggioli and of the dreadful things he would do to his henchman when he found him.

But to wait for hours! He went into the streets, to see placards upon street cars and omnibuses and in jewellers' windows. Someone was posing as himself and was expecting to reap a fortune. And the irony of it was, he, Sandro Peruzzi, could not prove that he owned the objects of art.

Never had he been so agitated, so furious and at the same time so bewildered. The ironic staff upon which he had leaned so long, upon which he had relied so assuredly, was now crumbled like so much rotten wood. Someone had stolen his *chefs-d'œuvre* (he was now calling them that instead of trinkets) and had stolen his name also. A chest filled with broken hopes and dreams was to be displayed to the public, while he, the creator, could only gnaw his nails impotently. How could this man know about the trinkets? Old Rosa might have spoken carelessly within the hearing of a clever thief. The great Peruzzi!

"May he rot in hell without the chance of Purgatory!" he whispered to the sky, himself in hell. Suddenly it came to him that he had nothing to say. Had he not pretended to be Benvenuto Cellini? Could he expose this scoundrel without exposing himself? Still, he had stolen only a name; he had sold the work of his own hands. But this damnable rogue . . . Forgetful where he was, Peruzzi struck his jaw

with his fist . . . and found himself seized by a traffic policeman.

"Hey, what do you mean by crossing when I signalled?" roared the traffic man.

"I am a foreigner. I beg pardon. I did not understand. I was deeply in thought."

"Well, the next time . . . "

But that was all Peruzzi heard. He turned in his tracks and returned to the hotel. He considered himself unsafe on the streets in his present confused state of mind.

When the hour came—the opening of the exhibition—he walked among many notables he had read and heard about. In fact, it was quite an affair, for the ballroom was nearly filled, and all of them seemed to enjoy the occasion. He heard many flattering observations, which only added to his misery. When finally he was able to get the master of ceremonies aside, he asked in a voice which did not sound like his own:

"When is the sale?"

"Saturday. There will be no auction. Everything has its price. Beautiful work, isn't it? You are an artist?"

"Yes."

"It is a pity that Peruzzi isn't here to enjoy his sudden fame. For this campaign will carry his name to all parts of the world. A remarkable discovery."

"Is this Peruzzi still living?" Peruzzi wondered if ever again his voice would sound natural in his ears.

"Yes, indeed."

"Who is back of this exhibition?"

"Queer thing about that. Nobody seems to know."

"But the money for the sale of the objects?"

"The Chemical Bank has charge of that. There was a private view by the critics yesterday. Oh, this Peruzzi will ride a high wave of popularity."

"Ah!"

Peruzzi wandered about aimlessly. He dared

not approach the tables with the masterpieces: he was afraid of crying out: *I am Peruzzi!* To be laughed at!

He began to think. Was the cunning gone from his hand? Could he create again? There was the fraudulent Cellini plaque; but he had turned that out in a fit of ironic rage against humanity.

A hand, falling upon his shoulder, interrupted this train of thought. He turned swiftly.

"Peruzzi, how are you?" said a voice in Italian, softly.

Peruzzi stammered something unintelligible and wildly eyed the central doors. For the man who had spoken to him was Henry Norton, to whom he had sold one of the Cellini plaques.

"A wonderful collection!" said Norton, smiling. "I did not expect to see you here to-day. But of course you'll be at the dinner?"

"Dinner?" Peruzzi fumbled with his monocle. "Yes, yes! We met in Florence." Dinner? What dinner and where? Was he awake and seeing and hearing these things, or had he

fallen asleep in the room! He began to polish his monocle.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a great sculptor?" asked Norton. "That plaque you sold me is the match for anything Cellini ever did."

Peruzzi's heart stopped, then began to beat his ribs fiercely. The noises in his ears made him feel as though he stood in the middle of a thousand *campanili*.

"Well, at dinner then, my old friend." And Norton sauntered on.

How Peruzzi got back to his room he never was able to recollect. Norton, Norton; and Norton admitted that he *knew*, yet did not upbraid him! He sat in his chair, motionless, for how long there was no computation. His recollection of time returned only when he heard a sound knock on the door. Norton, come to denounce him. Very good. He adjusted his monocle, stood up and squared his shoulders. He was a Peruzzi.

"Come in!"

A man entered—a man he had never seen before. He was round of face, alert of eye, but determined of chin.

"Well?" said Peruzzi.

"Get your evening clothes on, sir, and come with me," said the stranger.

"Who the devil are you?"

"A Pinkerton detective. Get on your clothes and don't keep me waiting. It is nearly seven o'clock."

"You are taking me to jail in a dress suit?" The old Peruzzi returned to the shell. Peruzzi laughed. Jail, in a dress suit. These Americans!

"Jail, or to the house of Robert Ellison, your son-in-law. So get busy."

Tableau.

CHAPTER XXII

BLOWS have indescribable effects. The sense of analysis departs and leaves the mind in a broken fog. Certain things may be seen, but their isolation renders them incomprehensible. Not the blow which renders you insensible but insensitive. You are alive; but as for your living effect upon your surroundings, you might as well be dead. So it came to pass with Sandro Peruzzi. He was temporarily dead mentally, but his body still moved among the living.

He got his body together, even though his mind feebly surrendered to the fog. He began to dress; but as his actions struck the detective as queer, the man silently assisted him, buttoning his shoes, putting on his collar and cravat, and making him put on his waistcoat before his coat. Peruzzi offered no protests.

The detective didn't know just how to act. His orders were strict; and yet he felt that he must say something to the little old codger, who seemed to be knocked into a heap. He got Peruzzi safely into a taxi, and they started uptown.

"Looks like a big thaw was on," the detective commented.

Peruzzi stared ahead. Do you know that a great evil deed and a great good deed have upon the human mind identically the same crushing effect? Only the recovery is different.

"Cold?" asked the detective. He pulled the rug over Peruzzi's knees. "Smoke, if you want to. The stuff quiets the nerves."

Silence on Peruzzi's part. The street lamps were all leaning toward the centre of the thoroughfare, that is to say, their standards were elliptical. He had a vague notion that his mind would not break if these posts or standards did not meet each other. So he concentrated upon the posts.

On his side, the detective, who was a good

student of human nature, began to grow worried. The old boy might go to pieces before he could be got to the Ellisons.

"Say, listen to me for a moment," he said. "The minute your son-in-law found out where you were stopping, he hired me to watch you. That pawnbroker would not touch that emerald necklace of yours because he had orders from me not to. Mr. Ellison had told the hotel people not to bother you with bills, that he would settle everything week by week. I was to watch to see that you did not slip off somewhere else. Buck up. To-morrow morning you'll be the newest rage in little old New York, which means the United States. But you've got to go to this dinner; no escape from that. That's the whole truth so far as I'm concerned. I know nothing beyond my orders. When I spoke of jail I was guying you."

Some of the lamp-posts righted themselves, which Peruzzi considered a promising sign. He did not understand more than half of what the detective said. By the time the taxi swung

down toward the Ellison mansion, Peruzzi saw the mental fog dissipating. His hunched shoulders resumed their normal uprightness. He even gave a twist to his moustache.

When the cab stopped before the door, he was almost himself. But he felt a strange void within him. He endeavoured to fill it several times with the old irony; but not even the ghost could be summoned. The bright rapier had been knocked from his hand in the most astonishing fashion by kindness! Still, when he entered the house he knew that his chin would be up, his shoulders flat.

"The taxi is paid for," said the Pinkerton man. "All I'm to do is to see that you go inside the house."

He took Peruzzi by the arm and led him up the steps, ringing the bell. As Charles the butler opened the door and Peruzzi stepped inside, the detective ran down the steps to the cab and was driven off.

Gravely Charles took Peruzzi's hat, coat, and cane and ushered him into the library, where

Peruzzi received his second shock. But he was able to recover from this: his sense of humour came to the surface. There were several gentlemen but no women in the room. Peruzzi needed no explanation regarding the absence of women. All his suavity and aplomb returned. The desire came to laugh, but he moderated this to a chuckle. He knew each of these men even to the Duke's private secretary. These were the men he had rooked with pseudo-Cellini plaques.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said, bowing.

Gravely they returned his salute. Norton alone smiled.

"Ah, Father-in-law," said Ellison, approaching, "I bid you welcome to my house. Gentlemen, Signor Peruzzi, whom you all know, one of the greatest artists of our times."

"Dinner is served," Charles announced.

Ellison took his father-in-law by the arm and led him into the dining room. The others took their places at the table, solemn of face, so solemn that Peruzzi threw back his head and laughed quietly.

All at once he noted the centre decoration—Cellini plaques. He did not laugh this time, but nodded affirmatively. Everything was clear to him.

Sherry was in the glasses, and Ellison raised his.

"Gentlemen, to the guest of honour, Sandro Peruzzi."

The toast was drunk.

"Gentlemen," remarked Peruzzi, "one would think, to look at you, that this estimable sherry was Socrates's hemlock."

"Life," said Ellison, "has many kinks in it. Many disappointments; many broken dreams. My father-in-law knew, years ago, that he was an artist, in the special work he did, without a peer. But the world refused to recognize the fact; it was not even approached with the fact; it was partly in ignorance. Because of this a queer notion came into his mind to prove what the world refused to believe. So he made these plaques and adroitly offered them at Cellini's. I am an authority on Cellini, and

even I was fooled. I have called you here to-night to present him to you in a new light—as a man who has come into his own through proper presentation. You have this day seen the marvellous sculptures of his. You know now the real man he is. I have, as you know, reclaimed all the plaques. It wasn't easy, because it was rather hard to make you gentlemen understand."

Peruzzi twisted the ends of his moustache: though his inclination was to lay his head upon his arms and weep.

"This plaque," continued Ellison, "is a thing of extraordinary beauty. Cellini himself could not have made anything better. But one of these plaques shall remain in existence; the others shall be destroyed. Each of you gentlemen has been given a certified check with interest for the amount you paid for the plaque."

Norton raised his hand for attention, "Ellison, I tore up my check. I purpose to keep my plaque. I would refuse ten times the amount I paid for it. That is final."

"We'll talk that over later," replied Ellison.

Peruzzi laughed again; for it struck him that in all his extensive reading he had never read anything so droll or so dramatic. It was astonishingly funny. These plucked pigeons pocketing cash given them by his son-in-law. The gravity of the English butler was funny. And so was the fact that he, Sandro Peruzzi, was the guest of honour. But he was a little afraid of his daughter; a certain danger lay in it. He must play into Ellison's hands. His face became benign. He rose, his glass upheld.

"Gentlemen, to my son-in-law, who is, to my mind, the finest gentleman I have ever known, whose charity to a rascally old scoundrel is something of a gold plaque in commemoration. Still," Peruzzi added, with a flash of his old irony, "it must have cost you a pretty penny. Now, gentlemen, to dinner. The great Peruzzi hasn't eaten anything to-day!"

So the strange dinner came to its end. The guests were not invited into the library for

tobacco and coffee. They were calmly escorted to the coatroom, where Charles helped them with their coats and solemnly offered them their hats. As Norton started for the door, Ellison stopped him with a hail.

"Come over to-morrow night for dinner, and we'll discuss the plaque."

"Very happy to," said Norton.

When the guests were gone, Ellison stopped in front of his father-in-law.

"Well?"—whimsically.

"Where is Lisabetta?"

Said Ellison: "I had rather you asked that question than any other in the world. Charles, tell Mrs. Ellison that we are in the library."

When they were alone in the library, Peruzzi asked: "Why?"

"Because my love for your daughter is more than all the pearls on earth. And besides, no man without real worth could have produced Lisabetta."

"My son," said Peruzzi, growing old suddenly,

"I did not know that there could exist so good a man as you."

"Thank Lisabetta."

"Can a man be made great by such publicity?"

"No. But if he is great, the public is thus made aware of it."

"I am beaten," said Peruzzi, his chin touching his breast. "Sandro Peruzzi is beaten to dust . . . by the magnanimity of the man he cheated."

"Man, man!" cried Ellison, slapping Peruzzi so violently that the monocle flew into the air. "But for you I should not have known Lisabetta."

"Lisabetta. I have suffered."

"I know."

"Two things took my heart out and dried it as before a fire."

"I understand."

Suddenly Lisabetta appeared. The dapper little man, who was sitting on the lounge, rose and bowed and sat down again.

"My father," she said.

"Yes, Lisabetta; at last." He took out of his pocket a tiny white woollen sock. "I stole this. It made me pay a poor thin tear."

Lisabetta looked at her husband with love and terror.

"Is that true, Betta?" cried Ellison.

"Yes."

Ellison fell upon his knees and wrapped his arms around her. Peruzzi fumbled with his collar. Then he bent his head in his hands.

"Father!"

"Yes, Lisabetta." Peruzzi looked up. "Can you forgive me? My soul got twisted somehow. Can you forgive?"

She ran to him, knelt, and drew his gray head to her shoulder.

"My father!"

For a time he did not move; he was afraid to; there was a sentimental debacle hovering over him. His power of will remained true, but for all that his heart was as full of cleavages as were his spurious emeralds, and quite as likely to

crack. Suddenly he held out toward Ellison, who knew that yonder was a conquered rebel—suddenly Peruzzi held out the little baby's sock.

"After all," the old rebel said brightly, "it was a Peruzzi that beat me!"

THE END